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JOHN 5

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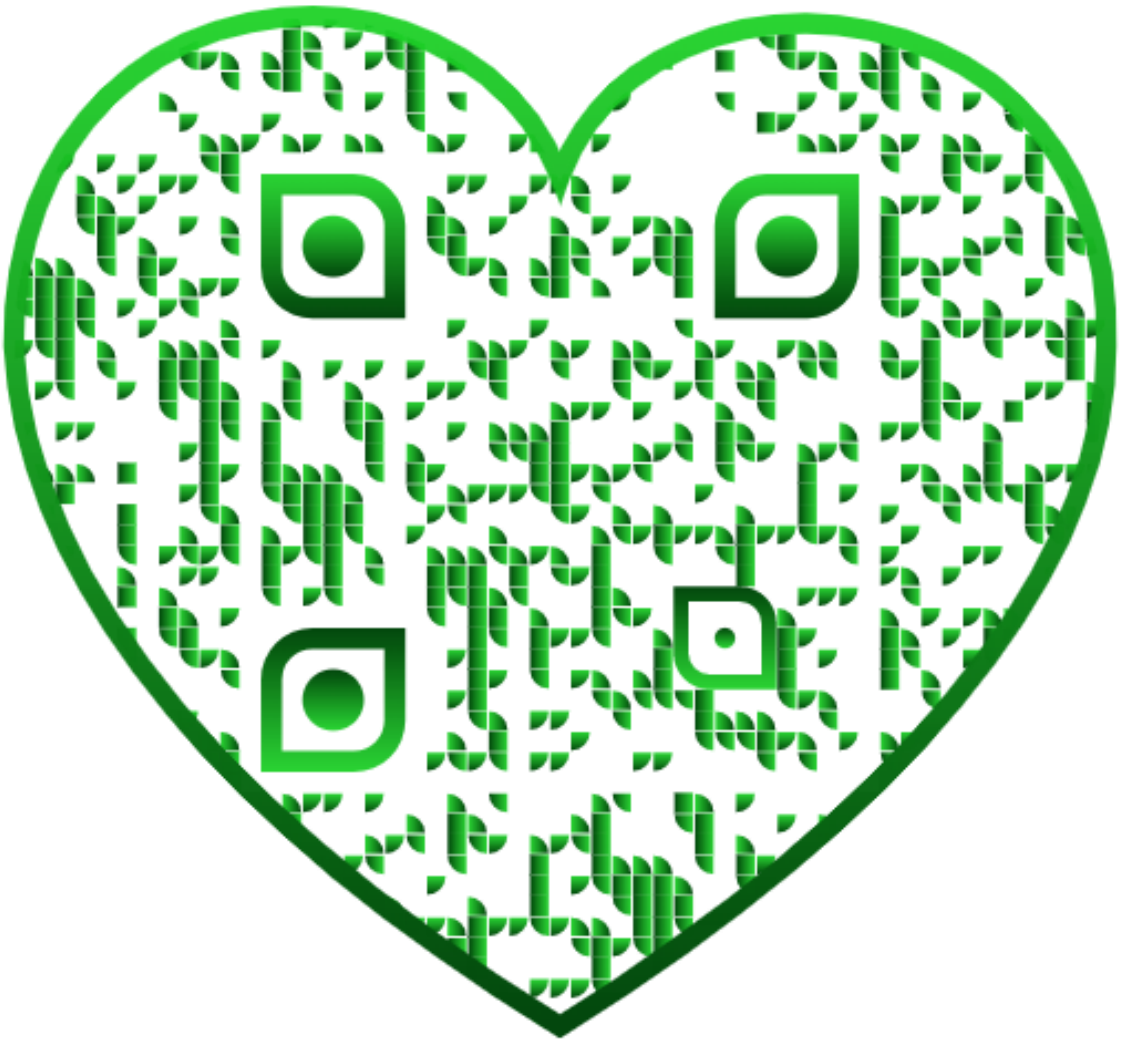

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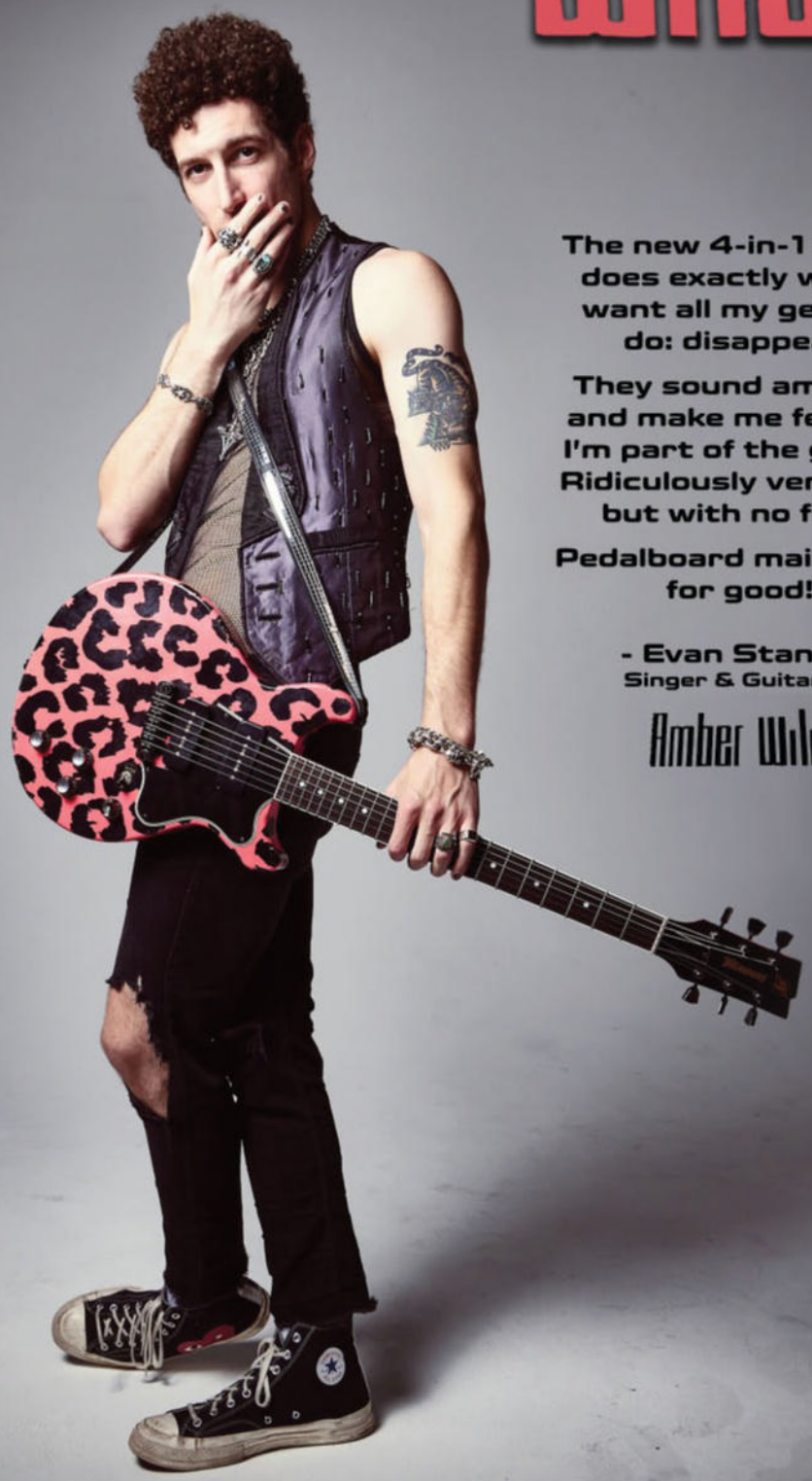

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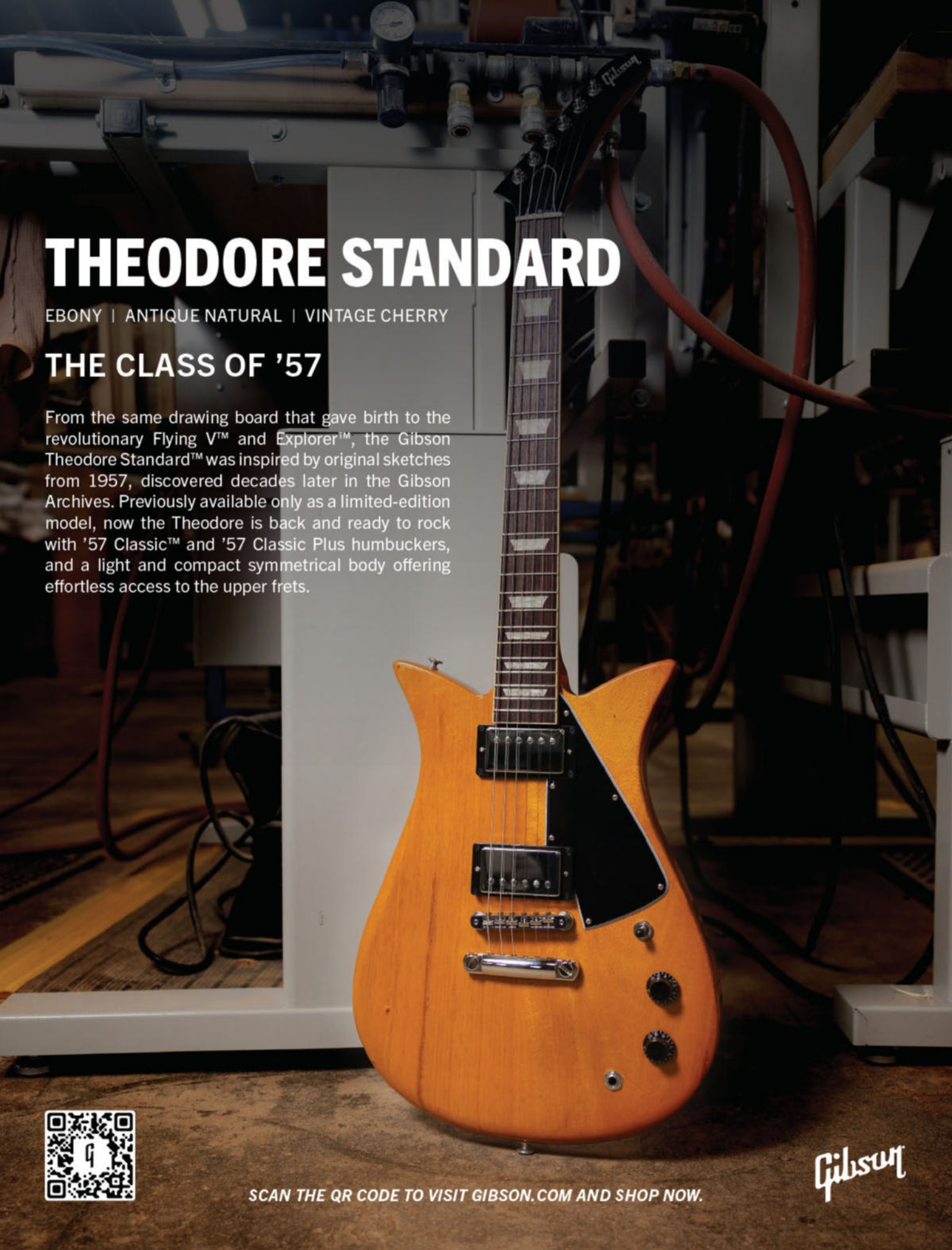
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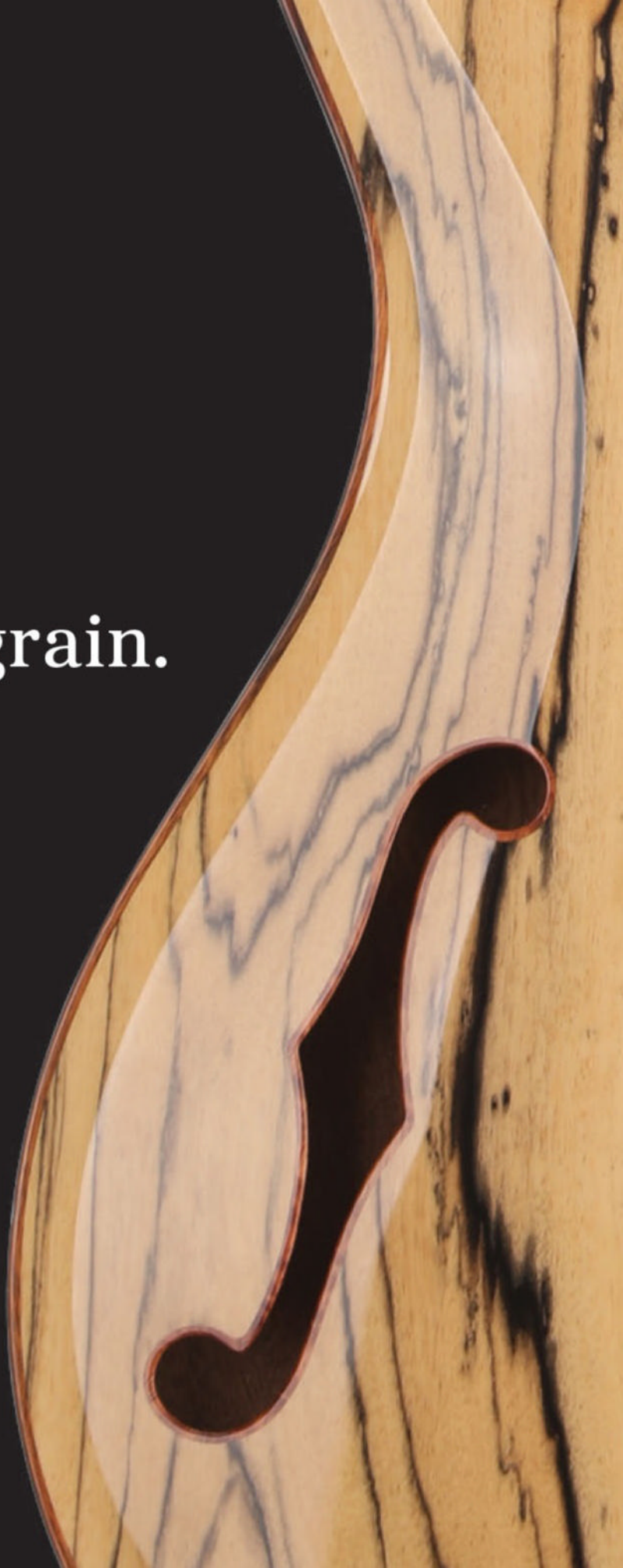

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THE WHOLE NUMBER

IT ISN'T OFTEN that an artist offers access to their private inner world, allowing us to learn something deep and vital about what makes them tick. Which is why this issue's interview with John 5 is not just unique but also a gift to be deeply appreciated.

When John told me this past February that he had a story he wanted to speak about exclusively with *Guitar Player*, I was intrigued. When he told me the gist of it, I not only felt honored that he chose our magazine; I also realized John was offering to relate a story that, beyond shedding light on his humanity and artistry, has the potential to have a positive influence on others who are dealing with grief, pain and other matters of mental health.

As John reveals to Joe Bosso in this issue's feature, over the course of many years, guitar playing has provided him a way to process OCD, panic attacks and grief from the deaths of many people close to him. Consequently, John's obsessive guitar playing has had unintended benefits, helping him become a virtuoso on the instrument and build a thriving career as one of the most stylistically versatile and accomplished players of our time. From his earliest years of endlessly studying his influences to his remarkable solo career, studio and stage stints with artists ranging from k.d. lang to Marilyn Manson, and his new job as guitarist for long-running metal rockers Mötley Crüe, John has found a positive outlet for problems that might have otherwise prevented him from enjoying a productive life.

But as he points out, the story here isn't simply about guitar playing. By sharing his battles and triumphs with us — and in creating the new biographical documentary, *I Am John 5* — John hopes to inspire others dealing with grief. "What I really want to do is shine a light on my experiences and show people who want to get into this business, or even people who might be dealing with mental illness, that you can go after your dreams," he says. "There is hope. It's possible to pick up the pieces and keep going. That's what I'm trying to do with the film — inspire people to turn negative energy into something positive."

In addition to entrusting us with his story, John has given *Guitar Player* unprecedented access to 10 of the guitars in his collection, including his very first Strat — the first real guitar he owned — and several custom builds, like his former main-squeeze Goldie Telecaster and current favorite, the Ghost Telecaster. Not incidentally, credit for the amazing photos of John and his gear go to L.A. photo ace Jen Rosenstein. I wish we could have shown you every one of the incredible images Jen took on this assignment — but that would have required a magazine at least twice this size.

I'm honored that John chose *Guitar Player* to share his story with you. I hope it inspires any reader grappling with mental health issues and grief to find help and to hang on to hope.

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Jackson Maxwell Online and Social Media Managing Editor,
jackson.maxwell@futurenet.com

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CONTENT
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Christopher Scapelliti, chris.scapelliti@futurenet.com
SENIOR EDITOR Art Thompson, arthur.thompson@futurenet.com
ART EDITOR Philip Cheesbrough, philip.cheesbrough@futurenet.com
PRODUCTION EDITOR Jem Roberts, jem.roberts@futurenet.com
LOS ANGELES EDITOR Jude Gold, judegold@gmail.com
FRETS EDITOR Jimmy Leslie, j@jimmyleslie.com
LESSONS EDITOR Jimmy Brown, jimmy.brown@futurenet.com
SENIOR IMAGE MANIPULATION TECHNICIAN Gary Stuckey
CONSULTING EDITORS, Jim Campilongo, Dave Hunter

ADVERTISING SALES
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Robert Dye robert.dye@futurenet.com, (732) 241-7437
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE Jeff Donnenwerth jeff.donnenwerth@futurenet.com, (678) 427-1535

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BRAND DIRECTOR, MUSIC: Stuart Williams
HEAD OF ART: Rodney Dive
CONTENT DIRECTOR, MUSIC: Scott Rowley
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John 5, photographed in Los Angeles by Jen Rosenstein, 2024

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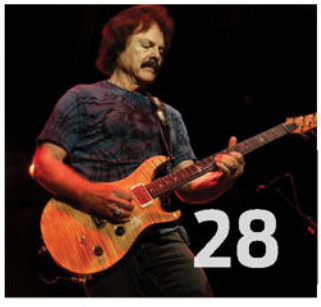

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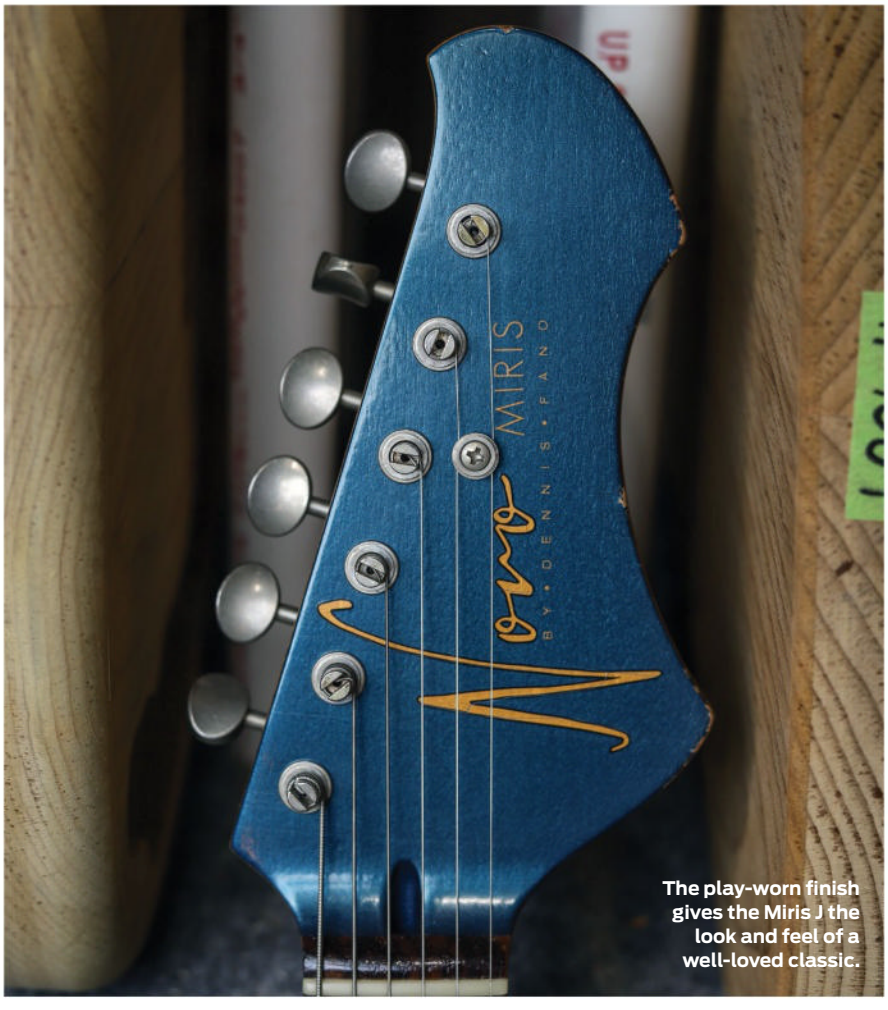
MODERN COMFORTS

With design tweaks and a bespoke Mastery trem, the revamped **Novo Miris J** becomes a sublime player.

BY DAVE HUNTER

The Mastery trem features an oversized baseplate and a striking lightning-bolt–shaped arm.



The play-worn finish gives the Miris J the look and feel of a well-loved classic.

FROM THE GUITARS sold under his eponymous brand in the 2000s to his current Novo brand, Dennis Fano has presented the guitar world with some of the most distinctive American-made instruments of the past 20 years. The newly revamped Miris J from Novo's new Nucleus Series is a case in point.

The big-name makers aside, any designer and manufacturer of electric guitars faces a twofold challenge when making inroads into the market: to create designs that look new enough to make their mark, and yet are not so radically unfamiliar as to be unapproachable. Dennis Fano is entering his third decade of threading that needle with stunning ease. After making his past-meets-future, play-worn Alt de Facto line in his own small shop for several years, Fano joined up for a time with the Premier Builder's Guild in California before launching Novo Guitars, now based in Nashville. He's been going from strength to strength with his designs ever since.

The entirely original Novo line has earned more attention — as well as more star endorsements — than anything Fano made previously, while firmly lodging his work among the more enduring boutique shops. Through its relatively short existence, Novo has also evolved through various dealer- and direct-based distribution systems. Fano currently uses a more efficient direct-only purchasing network that includes both standard models — the Nucleus Series, available with a range of preset options and a one- to two-month delivery window — and a Custom Order option with a much broader range of bespoke features and completion in about 12 months. Our review sample is from the former, yet it looks anything but "standard."

Although Novo has introduced other body types, including the single-cutaway Solus line (reviewed in Holiday 2020), the large-bodied, dual-cutaway, offset-waist style is the maker's signature look, as seen in its Serus J model. The Miris J is easily recognizable as its direct descendant, with similar Jazzmaster-meets-Rickenbacker lines and proportions applied to a semihollow design.

"The Serus J has been our most popular model from the beginning," Fano tells us, "so introducing a semihollow version a few years later seemed like a pretty sound move, and it worked out well. The Miris is now our second most popular model."

These solid and semisolid siblings have caught on with indie and alternative guitarists in particular, landing in the hands of both Wilco's Jeff Tweedy and Nels Cline, Soccer Mommy's Sophie Allison and Slider's Maria Schneider, but Fano tells us he had no intentions or predispositions when sketching out the Miris J.

"I don't have a target player in mind when I set out to design a new guitar, and that approach gives me immense creative freedom," he explains. "I view my designs as being reverent of tradition without being traditional. The absence of tradition invites players to pick up a Novo without any preconceptions of what the guitar is or what it does, and my hope is that will in turn allow players of all styles of music to be creative and find their unique, individual voice."

He's clearly onto something. Cline, who's known for playing jazz, fusion and indie rock, is often cited as a Jazzmaster player, but he told me two years ago he was deeply enamored of the Miris J that Dennis Fano built for him in 2019. "That's my favorite guitar,"

he raved, "and I have to say that it's hard to turn my head with new guitars."

It's easy to see how a Novo could do that trick. It has the feel and vibe of a rediscovered make from the golden age of the electric guitar, evidenced in the thin and often pre-aged nitrocellulose finishes, such as our example's Lake Como Blue, which beautifully shows off the grain of the swamp ash body. It's there as well in the tactile feel of the play-worn roasted-maple necks, and other touches. In addition, every Novo I've played has benefited from immaculate fret dressing, tight and tidy assembly and setup, and highly functional electronics and hardware.

The newly revamped Miris J is no different, and adds several appealing nuances to the look and feel without presenting any severe departures from the blueprint. "The 2024 Miris has a few updates that I first incorporated into a run of Signature Miris JG guitars a short while back," Fano explains. "These include a 'cat scratch' soundhole that echoes the shape of the control plate, a Serus pickguard and metal control plate, a tummy contour and rounded back edges on the body."

"I VIEW MY DESIGNS AS BEING REVERENT OF TRADITION WITHOUT BEING TRADITIONAL"

Perhaps the most significant change is the Novo NV vibrato by Mastery. As Fano reveals, he approached Mastery designer/owner John Woodland last fall seeking a proprietary tremolo. They somehow turned it around in time for the January NAMM show. "I'm always looking for new ways to elevate Novo and set us apart," Fano states. "I designed a distinctive, oversized baseplate with our tri-plate logo engraved in it and a striking lightning-bolt–shaped vibrato arm with a nickel-plated, machined aluminum tip. The tip has a great feel in the hand, and the new arm keeps the fulcrum point centered over the vibrato, giving it a super-smooth feel."

The vibrato is accompanied by Mastery's acclaimed M1 bridge, with a set of vintage-style tuners anchoring the strings at the other end after their trip across a 1.65-inch nut made from unbleached bone. The bolt-on neck is made to a scale length of 25 ½ inches and carved to a medium-C profile that measures .83 inches deep at the first fret. Its rosewood fingerboard carries 22 medium Jescar nickel-silver frets set into a compound 9.5 to 14–inch radius. A pair of Fralin P90s take it all out to the Switchcraft jack via a three-way switch and single volume and tone controls.

Tested through a tweed Deluxe–style 1x12 combo and a 65amps London head and 2x12 cab, the Miris J easily unveiled that "find your unique, individual voice" instrument that Fano sought to achieve. The Fralin pickups selected for this guitar display that characteristic P90 grit and girth when pushed, making it a fun, snarly rock and roller when shown a little overdrive, but they also clean up extremely well, eliciting clear, articulate tones that suit more nuanced stylings.

A stream of consciousness–like collage of diverse riffs culled from retro-metal, punk, garage rock, twang, roots-rock, shoegaze-leaning indie and even some pseudo-jazz found the Miris J leaping every hurdle and racing on for more, and doing so with considerably more playing comfort than the Miris Js I've played before. The vibrato works smoothly, the neck feels sublime in the hand, and the entire guitar plays beautifully from nut to neck joint. In short, it's another winner from Fano and the Novo stable, and a further bolster to this maker's stellar reputation.

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WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU

Sidelined by tinnitus and mental health issues, **John Osborne** came back a stronger guitarist than he was before.

BY JOE BOSSO

THE BROTHERS OSBORNE went through all kinds of hell while recording their last album, 2020's *Skeletons*. Lead guitarist John Osborne came down with tinnitus. His singer-guitarist brother, TJ, was sidelined for a month with salmonella poisoning. The historic tornado that hit Nashville that year caused their studio to lose power, and COVID continued to ravage the community, requiring the country-rock duo to finish the album while in quarantine.

Things didn't get easier as they prepared to record a follow-up, but this time the issues the brothers faced were more personal. TJ made headlines when he came out (making him the first openly gay artist on a major country music label), and he's used his position to become a leader for a more inclusive country community. Meanwhile, John struggled with depression and anxiety, leading him to seek help in a therapy retreat. "We've been through a lot, but we've had a lot of love and support," John says. "And in many ways, we're stronger as people and musicians. We channeled it all into our writing and wrote with our hearts wide open."

Throughout his life, John viewed the guitar as a trusted friend that was always there, especially during tough times. But the double shot of mental-health issues and ongoing tinnitus flattened him, and for the first time in a long time he put the guitar down. "It was difficult at first, because I didn't have my comfort blanket," he says. "Once I worked on me, I was able to come back to the guitar and feel interested in it again. Now I feel like I'm a better player. It's like I came back with a clean slate." He pauses, then says decidedly, "But it's only because I put in that work; otherwise, I'd be faking my way through."

The new album, titled simply *Brothers Osborne* (EMI Nashville) is as musically potent as anything the duo has ever done. But not surprisingly, hook-filled, commercial bull's-eyes like "Who Says You Can't Have Everything" and "Nobody's Nobody" display a newfound — and no doubt hard-earned — lyrical maturity. One of the most distinctive elements of John's playing is his ability to surprise, especially during solos, and on the country-funk groover "Ain't Nobody Got Time for That," he turns in a deliciously whacked-out industrial lead that's sure to raise eyebrows.

"Our producer, Mike Elizondo, is a total gear nerd, so we're kindred spirits," John says. "He said he heard an Electro-Harmonix Bass Micro Synth on that solo, so I tried it out, and it sounded amazing! I couldn't stop talking about it. My wife bought me one for my birthday, so you might hear more of that in the future. Anything can sound good in country music if you play from the heart."

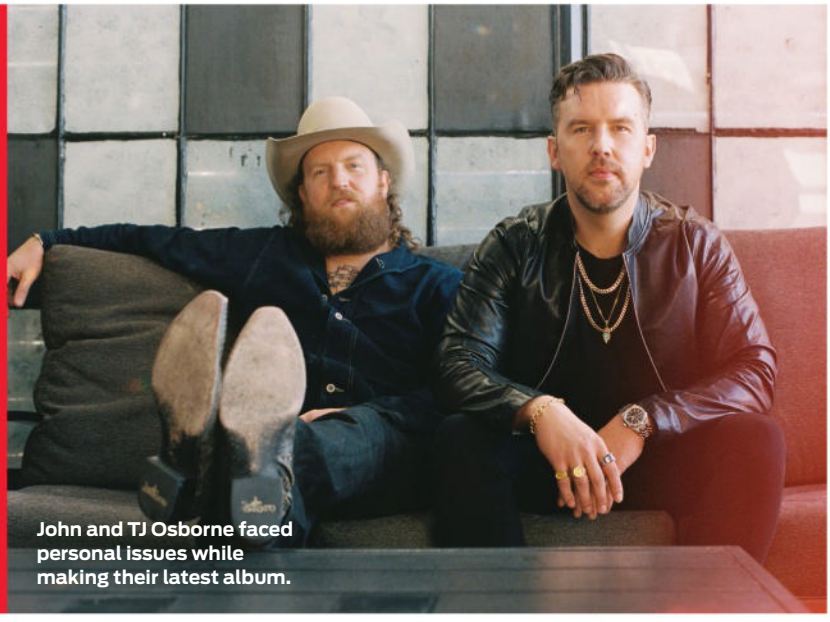
You and TJ really stretch the boundaries of country music, which begs the question: Do you consider yourself a country guitarist?

BECKY FLUKE @BFLUKE

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Brothers Osborne

"Who Says You Can't Have Everything," "Nobody's Nobody," "Goodbye's Kickin' In," "Ain't Nobody Got Time for That," "New Bad Habit"



John and TJ Osborne faced personal issues while making their latest album.

I do. I grew up playing country music, and I learned a lot of the old stuff. The first song I learned was "Your Cheating Heart" by Hank Williams. I studied a lot of country guys — Don Rich, Roy Nichols... people like that — but then I branched out. I listened to Alan Jackson and heard this insane guitar playing by Brent Mason. Then Brad Paisley and Keith Urban took things to another level. Am I a country guitarist? Sure. But the genre is so wide, just like rock. I mean, Chuck Berry is a rock guitarist, but so is Buckethead.

That said, you and TJ seem to be able to avoid country clichés, both lyrically and musically.

It's funny how country music gets such a bad rap. You ever hear people say, "I don't like country music because it's so lame," but they'll mention a country artist they do like? They never say that about other genres. I listen to all genres of music, and there's artists in each genre I don't like, but I don't put down the whole genre. [*laughs*]

To me, it's almost a philosophical question that comes down to authenticity. Luke Bryan is authentic because he isn't trying to be Sturgill Simpson. Sturgill Simpson doesn't try to be Luke Bryan. Same with Chris Stapleton. With TJ and me, we're just being ourselves. Thank God people like what we do, because we don't know how to be anything else.

You're interesting in that you play unexpected licks and solos, yet they seem to fit the material perfectly. And you don't need a lot of space, either. Your solo in "Who Says You Can't Have Everything" is very short and quirky, but it makes a point.

In my view, the guitar and the song are joined at the hip. Some guys go, "I've got four bars, eight bars — I'll noodle my way through." Why would you do that? If you've got four or eight bars as a lyricist, you wouldn't say, "I'll just sing whatever." I want what I play to be singable and memorable. That's why one of the best guitarists for songs is Mike Campbell. Everything he plays matters.

It took me a while to appreciate that, because when you're young you just want to burn and impress girls. I love jamming and improvising, but that doesn't work when you're trying to play for the song. I don't want to just kill dead space; I want to play something that sticks with you. It can be something adventurous or something simple, as long as it matters.

"ANYTHING CAN SOUND GOOD IN COUNTRY MUSIC IF YOU PLAY FROM THE HEART"

On "Goodbye's Kickin' In," your licks and soloing are quite simple, but they're as important as the lyrics.

That one was quite a bit like Tom Petty and Mike Campbell. I played a Tele through a Princeton amp and got a real clean sound. It's a bit of a Stones approach, too. I love the rhythm parts, and the solo is something like three notes, with tons of space.

Osborne with his 1968 "Smuggler" Fender Telecaster.

That's what's so surprising. A lot of guitarists would use that space to burn, but you went minimal. It's reminiscent of Steve Cropper or Curtis Mayfield.

There you go. I'm not saying, "Look at me." I'm saying, "Listen to the song." Cropper is a great example — keep it simple and singable. What did Miles Davis say? "Music is the space between the notes." It's hard to remember that sometimes, because, as guitarists, our instincts are to fill up all the spaces.

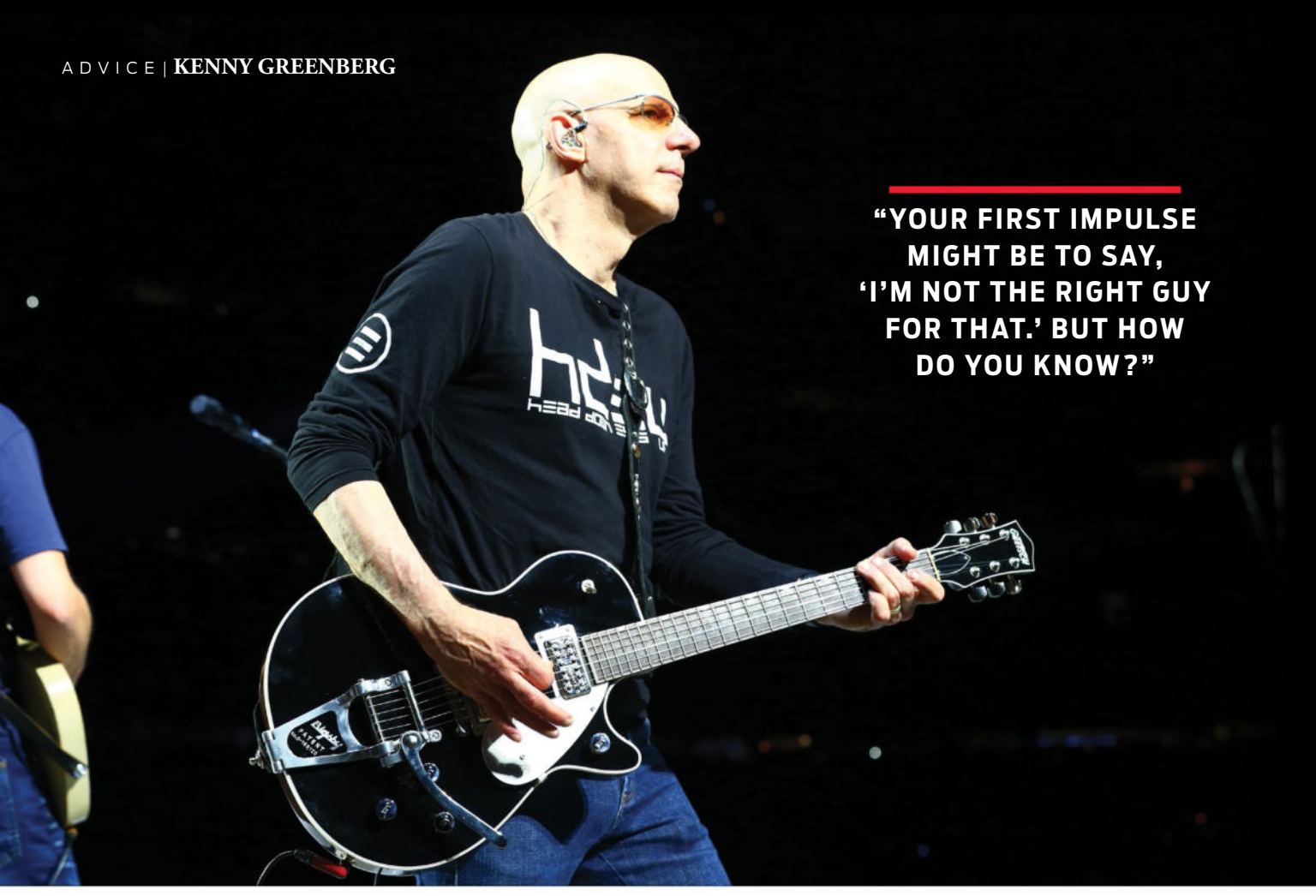
How do you seek new inspiration as a guitarist? Who are you listening to these days?

I've gone back and listened to stuff I used to ignore, like all the pop music Tim Pierce played on. Toto was a band I didn't have time for because it was my dad's music, but now I listen to it and it blows my mind. I've become obsessed with sounds. Tame Impala – how is that guy [*Kevin Parker*] getting those sounds out of a guitar? I mean, you wouldn't put him in a blues jam, but what he does is remarkable.

On the other hand, it might be cool if he *were* in a blues jam.

You know, you're right. [*laughs*] That juxtaposition would be cool. That's what I'm going for: If you're inspired, it'll come through in your playing, and it'll sound cool with your music.

BECKY FLUKE @BFLUKE



"YOUR FIRST IMPULSE MIGHT BE TO SAY, 'I'M NOT THE RIGHT GUY FOR THAT.' BUT HOW DO YOU KNOW?"

TIP SHEET

Journeyman **Kenny Greenberg** shares the advice that's made him a go-to guitarist for everyone from Willie Nelson to Taylor Swift.

BY JOE BOSSO

WHEN KENNY GREENBERG arrived in Nashville in the mid '80s, the Cleveland-born guitarist fit right into the country music session scene — because he didn't fit in. "I came from a rock and blues background, so I had my own angle going on," he says. "I infiltrated the country world by bringing a different sound and feel to the records that were being made. I always honored the song, but I had a fiery way of playing that people seemed to like."

Those people include the likes of Taylor Swift, Brooks & Dunn, Gretchen Wilson, Willie Nelson, Trisha Yearwood, Bob Seger, Kenny Chesney and Amy Grant, among others. "I've been very fortunate to have worked with so many incredible artists," Greenberg says. "I always say, 'I'm not the kind of guitar player who can play everything perfectly. I play like me.' But I think having that little bit of personality has paid off. You can get a lot of guys who sound like each other. I'm not that guy."

A lot has changed in the music industry since Greenberg began his career. Budgets are tighter, and an increasing number of album projects are being cut in home studios. "There's still a lot of work, but you learn to acclimate to the times you're in," he says. "I produce, and I do some film and TV stuff. Plus, everybody has a road gig now. I do a fair amount of touring. A lot of times you're out Thursday through Saturday, and during the week you do sessions."

Whatever career goals you have in mind, Greenberg's sage pieces of wisdom are bound to put you on the right track. "Some things take a little explanation," he says, "but a couple bits are pretty simple. First, don't be a cookie-cutter guitarist. Be yourself. Own what you are and be the best version of that. And no matter what, don't be the musician who's always late. Nobody appreciates that in any business."

1 WHEN THE SINGER IS SINGING, TURN DOWN

"I recently had this experience with another guitar player. It was kind of shocking, really, because I thought everybody knew this by now. But it's very simple: When the singer is singing, turn your volume down.

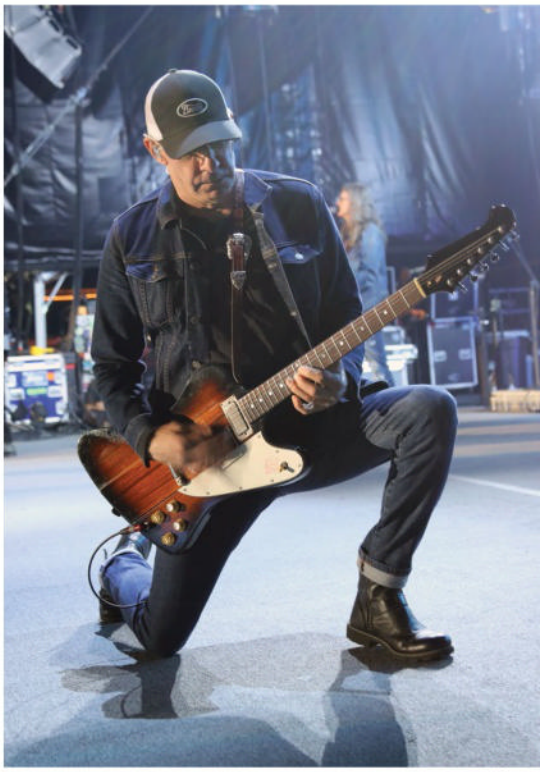
"I admit, I was once an offender. When I first started playing gigs, I was loud and proud all the time. Finally, somebody said, 'Dude, when I'm singing, turn your guitar down!' Over time, while playing with other people, I just figured it out. Some guys like to use their volume pedals, but I prefer the knob on my guitar. It's always right there.

"By the way, this also applies to when another guitar player is soloing. If you want respect from other players, you need to show them respect."

2 IF YOU WANT TO WORK, PLAY RHYTHM

"Here's the truth: If you're a great rhythm guitar player, you'll always have a gig. Mack McAnally said this a while back, and he was so right. Everybody wants a great rhythm player

JILL TRUNNELL



Let your solos do the talking for you. See tip number three.

in their band or in the studio, and they're hard to find. There's tons of soloists. You look on YouTube, and that's all you see. I'm not knocking them, either — they're amazing. But the guitarist who plays great rhythm is the one who's going to be working.

"This applies more to the studio than live situations. When you're playing a gig, you can get away with a lot. But in a studio environment you're put under the microscope, and if your rhythm playing isn't right on the money, you're not going to get called back. It can be a career maker or a career breaker.

"I fully admit, I'm not the best rhythm guitarist out there. My timing moves around a bit. Sometimes I rush things and I need to go back and punch in. But I play with a lot of feel and attitude, and I know how to get in the right groove. If you're in the pocket with the drummer and it makes the song work, and if you're playing off the vocals in the right way, then you're doing your job."

3 MAKE YOUR SOLOS CONVERSANT

"I think the best solos are when the guitarist is trying to speak through the instrument, just as the singer is doing with their voice. Some of the best players out there carry on a dialog when they're soloing. Derek Trucks always sounds like he's talking right to you. Jimi Hendrix and B.B. King had that, too. When you're playing, think, Am I communicating something to the listener? Am I letting somebody in on a feeling without using words? I'm always thinking that when I play.

"Some guys work off the melodies and lyrics to develop themes in their solos. They'll play a variation of the verses, and they'll develop a narrative in their solo. I approach a lot of things that way. Other guys play songs within a song. George Harrison was the absolute best at that. Everything he played was memorable. You can't even think of the song without his solo. It's like he was talking to you — because he was."

4 SAY YES TO EVERYTHING

"If you're just starting out, don't be an elitist — say yes to everything that comes your way. Later on, when you're established, you can be picky about what gigs or sessions you want to say no to.

"There are a lot of advantages to being open-minded. If somebody likes what you play, they might hire you for more things, or they might recommend you to somebody else. That's how this business works. But musically, you shouldn't be afraid to take chances. It's good to put yourself in difficult or uncomfortable situations. Your first impulse might be to say, 'I'm not the right guy for that.' But how do you know?

"I remember one time when I played on a John Mellencamp song. He came to Nashville and re-recorded some stuff with a producer named Tony Brown. I played on a song that was in this weird, totally bizarre tuning. I had no clue what was going on, and somebody said, 'Oh, Kenny, this is the tuning.' I still didn't know what to do. There was another guitar player on the date, and I said, 'Why don't you play it?' He said, 'No, I don't think so.' So I said, 'Okay, I'm going to do it,' and I ended up doing it, but I came up with my own way of playing it. It was really, really cool. I'm not even sure if the song ever came out. I just remember that I was sweating my ass off, but then I thought, God, this is actually really cool.

"There was another time when someone asked me to play a solo direct to the console. That wasn't how I recorded, but I said, 'All right, I'll try it.' Not only did it work out and sound great, but it's now become one of the things that I like to do. It was unnerving at first, but I tried it and it sounded great. I could have said no — but I didn't."

5 DON'T SPEND TOO MUCH TIME SCREWING AROUND WITH YOUR GEAR

"This is true when playing live, but it's especially important when you're recording in the studio. Time is money, and you want to be the guy who can come in and get a sound right away. Be able to dial it up with no worries: There's my sound — boom. Maybe you'll be asked to adjust it, or a producer or artist will want to try something else. That's fine. But you should be able to plug in and have a good sound in 15 minutes.

"With sessions that last a couple of hours, you're expected to dial up a sound and play. Be aware of that and you can avoid getting nasty glares from people. This is true in Nashville, and I'm sure it's the same wherever records are being made. You want to be the guy nobody has to worry about."

Greenberg performs in Las Vegas, April 3, 2016.

JILL TRUNNELL (TOP); MARK DAVIS/GETTY IMAGES FOR ACM (2016)

REBELS WITHOUT A PAUSE

Since 1977, **Dean Guitars** has drawn guitarists looking for quality axes with attitude. Nearly 50 years on, they're pushing the envelope on innovation... and still raising hell.

BY ART THOMPSON

DEAN ZELINSKY WAS just 17 when he founded Dean Guitars in 1977 with the single-minded purpose of making better instruments for rock and metal players than existed at the time. Using Gibson templates to start with, he created stylish guitars that included the V (Flying V), Z (Explorer) and the iconic ML, which combined the bottom of the V and the upper half of the Z. They all carried a standout element in the V-shaped

Chris Cannella (left) and Patrick Schuleit are leading Dean's growth in the market and in artist relations.

Models in Dean's current lineup include (from left) the USA Custom Shop Cadillac Translucent Red, Cadillac 1980 Silverburst, USA Custom Shop Vengeance Translucent Purple and Thoroughbred Classic Floyd FM Duncan Slime.

headstock that defined the Dean look, making them flashier and more rock than any other U.S.-made six-string electrics available in the late '70s. With artists like Elliot Easton of the Cars, Rich Williams of Kansas, and especially ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill — who flaunted fur-covered spinning customs in the 1983 "Legs" video — Dean hit the bull's-eye as the go-to brand for players seeking something closer to a Lamborghini than a Les Paul.

Zelinsky sold the company in 1991, and after languishing for several years it was purchased by Armadillo Enterprises, whose visionary founder and CEO, Elliot Rubinson, breathed new life into the business, in the process bringing in key endorsers like Dimebag Darrell, Michael Schenker, Dave Mustaine, Leslie West and Michael Arnott, among others.

Summarizing the trajectory of Dean Guitars in the ensuing years, company president Patrick Schuleit says, "When Elliot got the company in '96 and we launched it in '97, he really brought it back from the dead — for lack of a better term. When Elliot passed away in 2017, there was a change for about five and a half years, and then Pam [*owner and CEO Pamela Keris-Rubinson*] decided she didn't feel the company was going the way Elliot intended, so she came back in and we reorganized. We've been firing on all cylinders ever since, and things have been great."

"WE'RE FOCUSED ON BRINGING BACK THE REBELLION, RAISING THE MIDDLE FINGER AND BRINGING BACK THAT BAD-BOY ATTITUDE"

Despite ongoing legal wrangling between Armadillo Enterprises, Gibson and other entities, the company is a major contender in the guitar market and boasts a clan of artists that includes Kerry King (Slayer), Greg Tribbett (Mudvayne, Hellyeah), Jon Donais (Anthrax), John Connolly (Sevendust), Karl Sanders (Nile) and Wayne Lozinak (Hatebreed), all of whom have signature models culled from Dean's USA Custom Shop and offshore-produced lines.

"We had a massive demand for our Custom Shop guitars coming out of COVID," says Chris Cannella, Dean's brand manager and director of artist relations. "That's spurred us on to add additional people and grow the business. At the height of COVID, our lead time ramped up to 24 months, and with some better management and some additional employees we've brought it down to 14 months, which is a lot more reasonable and more in line with the industry.

"And we're producing more guitars at the same time, so we've had a really nice win that we're happy to continue to invest in. Because we feel like if we can produce more guitars, we have the demand that still exceeds our capacity."

How many guitar lines are currently available from Dean?

PATRICK SCHULEIT We have the ultimate offering, which is the USA Custom Shop. Then you have the Select Series, Classic Series and the X Series. So there are four different price points in different areas, and it's really streamlined. We're a high-performance company and it's all about quality first now. We're also trying to make the same finishes available at all price points. We have some unique finishes that have been around for a long time, and we want to make sure that our customers have access to those.

Like most other companies, you're producing guitars here and abroad. The Vengeance Select Floyd Fluence guitar we received for review is from Indonesia. Is China also involved in your offshore production?

CHRIS CANNELLA The USA Custom Shop is based at our headquarters in Tampa, Florida, and then we have offshore

(from left) Dean USA Custom Shop ML 79 Anejo Burst, ML 79 Black Blue Fade, Exile Select 7 Floyd Influence Natural Black Burst and Exile Select Archtop Satin Black Burst.

manufacturing in the usual places, although we have very little going on in China with electric guitars.

In today's world, with so many quality guitars available at all price points, how do you keep Dean a brand that stands out from the crowd?

CANNELLA It's a great time to be a consumer because everybody makes great guitars, but I always say, "What makes your story more relatable to the end user?" So we're focused on bringing back the rebellion, raising the middle finger and bringing back that bad-boy attitude. Another piece of that puzzle is a renewed focus on the ML. That's our trademark guitar that has been the hallmark of the brand. We're going to be completely focused on getting as many iterations of the ML into the market, because for a long time we didn't really do that. It's really important to us to have all different versions and flavors of the ML available, because there's a lot of customers for that guitar and it's uniquely Dean.

How do you balance the need to trumpet your legacy with being innovative and introducing concepts that appeal to modern players?

SCHULEIT We pride ourselves on the fact that we're not stuck in the past. That's why we have the Classic Series, which is the more traditional guitar that everybody is used to. But with the Select series we've been teaming up with different companies and introducing even more innovation, because, as we all know, guitar players are getting better and demanding higher-performance tools. So you can take something as classic as an ML and add stainless-steel frets, glow-in-the-dark side dots, Babicz and Evertune bridges and all different types of things that can be there for the modern player. There are many great pickups out there; we use Seymour Duncan, Fishman Fluence and EMG. But we also hand-wind our own pickups, the DMTs, and we're actually adding some of those into the import line.

"WE BUILD AS GOOD A GUITAR AS ANYBODY, AND FOR THE PRICE I DON'T THINK ANYONE CAN TOUCH US"

What are some of the advantages of building pickups in-house?

CANNELLA We've got an amazingly talented team of musicians in the building, and as far back as 2006 we had this idea with one of our key employees — a guy named Pat Baker — to start winding pickups, and we've gotten that going and have been doing it for a number of years. We've had a number of artist-endorsed pickups — the Leslie West Mountain of Tone pickup has consistently been our best seller, and we've had some other versions of that. Pat has his own custom pickup called the Baker Act, and we've been doing the Nostalgia vintage-style humbucker and it's a fantastic pickup. They're hand-made and we're really proud of those. Most of them end up in our guitars so we don't have a lot of them available for resale. It hasn't been a priority like it should be, but that's something we're actively working on in the background.

We also have something coming out called the Nefarious, which is a vintage-style pickup that's good for modern metal. We're just trying new stuff. Sometimes we'll even have the employees experiment and come up with ideas. They'll show them to us and say, "We made this with wooden bobbins and tried this many winds of this gauge of wire and these types of magnets." It's all about trying something new. They'll come up with some really neat things, and it's exciting.

What is important for people to keep in mind about Dean these days?

SCHULEIT We build as good a guitar as anybody, and for the price I don't think anyone can touch us. We're still at the reasonable end of what a U.S.-made custom shop guitar can cost, and that's really significant.

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Tom Johnston (center) performs with Patrick Simmons (left) and John McFee at Burbank's iHeartRadio Theater, October 1, 2021.

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

His long train keeps on runnin'. The Doobie Brothers' **Tom Johnston** shares the stories behind the classic tracks that he loves best.

BY GARY GRAFF

"WE WERE A work in progress all the time," Tom Johnston says, recalling the Doobie Brothers' first era, from 1970 to 1977. The effort certainly paid off: You'd be hard-pressed to find a band with a more prolific and successful eight-year run than the Doobies had at that time.

Formed in Santa Cruz, California, the Doobies' put four of their first six albums in the Top 10 of the *Billboard* 200, with two — 1973's *The Captain and Me* and '74's *What Were Once Vices Are Now Habits* — selling double Platinum. Then there were the hits: "Listen to the Music," "Long Train Runnin'," "China Grove," "Takin' It to the Streets" and many more, which accounts for the Diamond status of 1976's *Best of the Doobies*.

Singer-guitarist Johnston was the primary songwriter during that time, though he and Patrick Simmons also forged one of the most potent and complementary six-string tandems of the 1970s. "We had Pat's fingerpicking, we had my rhythm, we had rock and roll," he notes. "So we would venture into all three of those arenas and try stuff. It was a lot of fun."

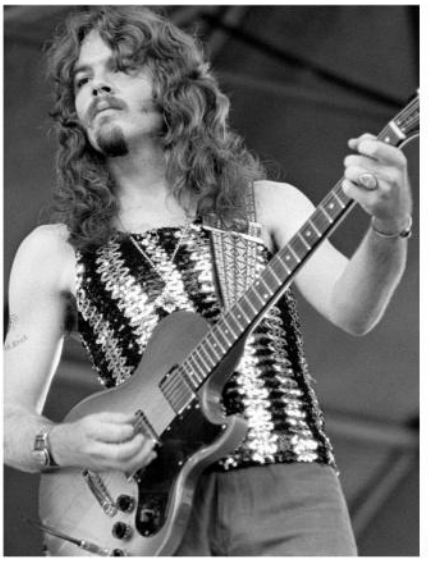
Johnston temporarily departed the Doobies in 1977, five years before the group broke up. He returned to the reformed band's ranks in 1987 and helped lead its full-fledged reunion two years later. Since then, the Doobies have released six more studio albums and have another on the way this year. The band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame back in 2020, and Johnston and Simmons teamed up to write the 2022 memoir *Long Train Runnin': Our Story of the Doobie Brothers*. The long train hasn't run out of steam, either; Johnston, Simmons and John McFee were joined by Michael McDonald for a 50th anniversary tour that began during 2021, after a pandemic delay, and is still going, with McDonald also part of the new album.

As he prepared to hit the road for another summer, Johnston gave us the inside stories on these songs we've been listening to for a great many years — and probably will for many more to come.

"LISTEN TO THE MUSIC" *TOULOUSE STREET* (1972)

"This one came about in my bedroom in San Jose — early 1972 or maybe late 1971. I had a chord structure. That's actually one of the few songs I just sat down

FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES FOR IHEARTMEDIA



Johnston plays onstage with a Gibson L6-S in 1974.

and wrote and had everything, words and music, at the same time. Usually the music's first and the words later. I came up with a lick and started putting the words together and called Ted [*Templeman, producer*]. Woke him up at two in the morning, or something like that, which he wasn't really happy about.

I played it for him over the phone and he said, 'Yeah, maybe. Call me tomorrow.' [*laughs*]

"So I did, and he said, 'Let's get it down here and see what we can do with it in the studio.' I thought it was a single; it's the only time in my life I've ever had that feeling. We hadn't had one yet — at least not one that was successful, I should say. So we got down in the studio and we kept it pretty much the same as it was. The lyrics all stayed the same; the chords all stayed the same.

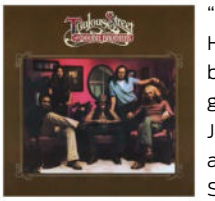
"This was during the Vietnam era, so I'm assuming that had something to do with the lyrics I came up with. I was still involved with San Jose State [*University*], and there were a lot of SDS riots over there. [*Students for a Democratic Society led highly effective campus protests against the war.*] I got drafted and had to go to two different draft centers, Fresno and Oakland, so I was familiar with everything and against the war and all that stuff, so it just filtered into the lyrics. I thought people would get along a lot better if they used music to communicate rather than political rhetoric. I was trying to give it a utopian view, I guess. I was listening to Alan Watts in school a lot. [*Watts had a show on KPFA radio, where he shared his views on religion and philosophy.*]

"I TOLD HIM, 'IT DOESN'T HAVE WORDS. I JUST MAKE 'EM UP EVERY NIGHT.' HE SAID, 'WELL... WRITE SOME, MAN!'"

"When I got down to the studio, Ted and Donn Landee, the engineer, had ideas about miking the strings on the electric as well as miking the neck on both the acoustic and the electric, which for me was a Les Paul through a Fender Bandmaster, as I recall. That's where all that rhythm sound came from, and it was the sound of that single and, yeah, our first hit."

"ROCKIN' DOWN THE HIGHWAY"
TOULOUSE STREET (1972)

IAN DICKSON/REDFERNS(JOHNSTON); GIJSBERT HANEKROOT/REDFERNS (BAND)



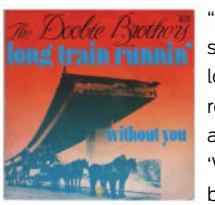
"'Rockin' Down the Highway' is about being on Highway 17, going between San Jose and Santa Cruz, and being up in the Santa Cruz mountains. It's not specific in that sense, but it's basically about having the top down and having a ball, being footloose and fancy free in that era.

"This was one of my early songs. I'd written the chorus probably before the band was even together. I'd been playing with a band in San Jose and came up with that chord structure. I think I developed the rest of the song after that with the Doobies in the studio while we were making *Toulouse Street*, our second album.

"*Toulouse Street* was made over two time periods. The first sessions weren't that good, because we hadn't started working with Ted Templeman yet. We had started recording songs up in San Francisco at Wally Heider's [*Wally Heider Studios*], and we didn't come up with anything that was really catchy. Warner Bros., our label, let us know that. We had a couple songs we thought were really good, but they said, 'We're gonna send a guy up there we think you should work with.' In fact we already knew Ted, because he was [*producer*] Lenny Waronker's assistant on our first album.

"So we and Ted started working at Amigo Studios in North Hollywood, which became Warner Bros. Studio, and we started developing other songs, like 'Listen to the Music' and 'Rockin' Down the Highway.' We laid this one down in the process of doing other tunes — probably 'Jesus Is Just Alright.' All the songs we were doing were kind of chucked into the mix, and we just kept working on them until we got them down right. It's not hard to figure out why 'Rockin' Down the Highway' caught on like it did. People loved that song, and it still goes over really well."

"LONG TRAIN RUNNIN'"
THE CAPTAIN AND ME (1973)



"We were playing this song back in 1970, long before we ever recorded it. It was just a jam. I think the line 'Without love' was the biggest hook, aside from the rhythm. Ted requested that we record it for *The Captain and Me*. I told him,

'It doesn't have any words. I just make 'em up every night.' And he said, 'Well... Write some, man!' [*laughs*] I said, 'Yeah, good point. But are you sure you want me to do this? 'Cause it's really just a jam.' And he said, 'I think it could be great. Why don't you write it about a train or something?' It's got that kind of feel, plus there's the line about 'Miss Lucy down along the tracks.'

"So I walked into another room at Amigo Studios — we were constantly working there for about four or five years — and I wrote the words for it, brought 'em back and put 'em down. The song came to fruition like that. We came up with the harmonica part in the studio, too; I didn't play that live because I had to play rhythm guitar, but we did it for the record. To my surprise, it ended up being a popular song. I really didn't expect much out of it."

"THE ONLY SONG I EVER FELT WAS A SINGLE WAS 'LISTEN TO THE MUSIC.' 'LONG TRAIN RUNNIN'' SURPRISED ME"

"CHINA GROVE"
THE CAPTAIN AND ME, 1973

"This is one I wrote in the bedroom in San Jose. I just started playing that main lick on the acoustic guitar and thought, This would be great on electric! So I went and grabbed [*drummer*] John [*Hartman*], who was in the bathroom — he had a room at the house as well — and said, 'Hey, let's go downstairs and do this.' I still didn't have the words when we cut the track in the studio. I probably wrote them there.

"Ted and Donn put the echo on the guitar, which was something new for us. As far as the instruments and the amps, they kind of remained the same for everything. I think it was an SG through a Bassman or Bandmaster.

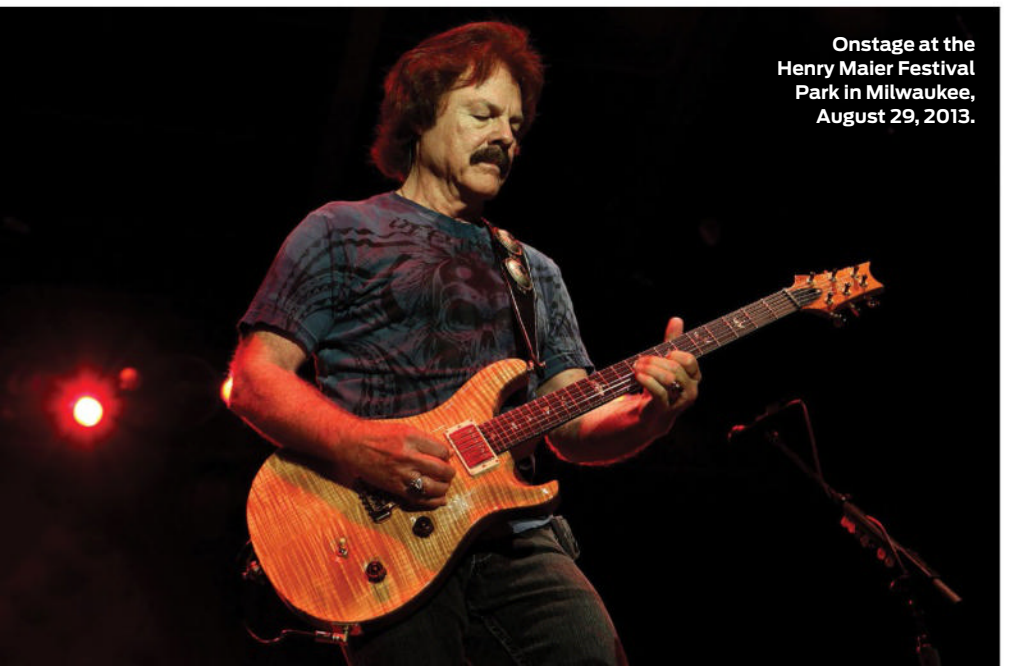
"I don't know if I was thinking in a 'hit' vein at that point or not. As I said before, the only song I ever felt was a single was 'Listen to the Music.' 'Long Train Runnin'' surprised me; 'China Grove' surprised me; 'Rockin' Down the Highway' surprised me. 'Another Park, Another Sunday' didn't take off as a single for whatever reason, but its flip side, 'Black Water,' took off. And that was a surprise too."

"THE DOCTOR"
CYCLES, 1989

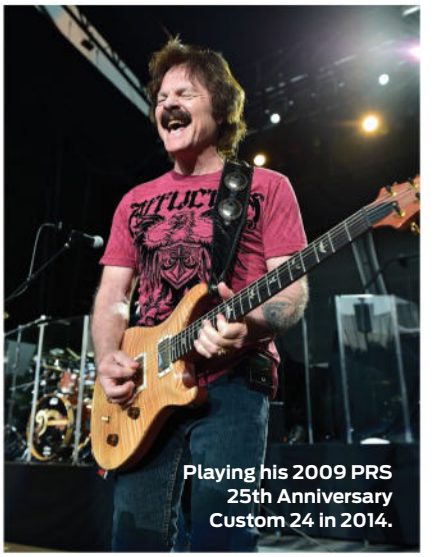
"This was a comeback song for us after we regrouped. We had done some shows, some benefits and then some other concerts to pay for those, because we were a pretty large band back then. Ted said, 'Why don't you put the original band back together and do another album?' and everybody said, 'Well, sure.' [*Singer/keyboardist*] Mike [*McDonald*] was doing his solo thing and a couple of the other guys [*guitarist John McFee and drummer Keith Knudsen*] had Southern Pacific going on, but we had me, Pat, John Hartman, [*second drummer*] Michael Hossack and Tiran Porter [*who replaced founding bassist Dave Shogren in 1972*], and that was pretty much the original band.

"I wrote 'The Doctor' when I was playing with a band called Border Patrol. By the time I took it into the studio for what ended up being *Cycles*, our producers Charlie Midnight and Eddie Schwartz had gotten involved with the writing. The initial chord structure was the same as what I'd come up with, but we changed the chorus to what I felt was poppy sounding. It was not at all what I'd originally come up with, but if we'd done it my way it wouldn't have sold like it did, so I give them credit for that. They also helped me with the lyrics. I wrote the verses and we wrote the choruses together.

"It's a fun song, and I enjoyed doing it in the studio. We recorded it at the Plant, in Sausalito, where Fleetwood Mac recorded *Rumours*. A lot of other people did very successful albums there. It was just a fun place to work, and it suited us. Everybody felt good about the album. Next thing, we we're back on the road again, and we've never stopped."



Onstage at the Henry Maier Festival Park in Milwaukee, August 29, 2013.



Playing his 2009 PRS 25th Anniversary Custom 24 in 2014.

RAYMOND BOYD/GETTY IMAGES (2013); STEVE JENNINGS/WIREIMAGE (2014)

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How Rock Rolled

Overshadowed by the Les Paul, the **Gibson ES-295** brought rock to concert stages in the hands of Scotty Moore.

VIEWED WITH 21ST century hindsight, the two radical gold-finished guitars released by Gibson in 1952 appear about as rock and roll as they come. In fact, that term was barely in use when the Les Paul and ES-295 arrived that year, and neither was conceived with rock in mind, even though both would help define its look and sound.

The March 1951 single "Rocket 88" by Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats (a front for Ike Turner and His Kings of Rhythm) is often cited as the first rock and roll song, but the genre didn't fully hit its stride until Elvis Presley's "That's All Right" hit the airwaves in July '54. And when it hit the stage, Scotty Moore was right alongside him, churning out those signature riffs on his gold Gibson ES-295. It might not have been the birth of rock as such, but for many, that sound, that look and those riffs are seen as the birth of rockabilly, at least.

The ES-295 was essentially a hot-rodded ES-175, souped up with some input from Les Paul himself. When it debuted in 1949 the ES-175 was Gibson's first archtop guitar constructed with top, back and sides made from laminated maple in a bid to cut down on feedback in a guitar that was primarily intended to be amplified, rather than used acoustically. It had a single P90 pickup in the neck position and a sunburst finish (natural was available later), and it retailed at $175, hence the model name.

The ES-295 hit the streets in May 1952 retailing at — you guessed it — $295, with two P90s, an all-gold paint job and a fancy new wrapover-trapeze tailpiece suggested by Les Paul himself. The gold finish, actually achieved with metallic bronze flakes suspended in the lacquer, is best known for its appearance on the Les Paul goldtop that arrived in March '52, which retained this look until a sunburst finish arrived on the model in '58. On the ES-295, however, the gold finish covered the entire guitar (other than the fingerboard, headstock and binding, of course), something done on relatively fewer Les Pauls. It was a color the guitar star had suggested himself to present a sense of luxury in his signature model, although Les Paul has also told of having asked Gibson to make an ES-175 with a gold finish in late '51 as a gift for an injured war veteran.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

The unusual combination wrapover bridge with trapeze "tail" was also a Les Paul invention, and infamous for having been used incorrectly on the Les Paul Model for its first year or so of production. From its release until mid- or late '53, Gibson manufactured the Les Paul with a neck angle that was too shallow to accommodate the strings being wrapped over the bar of this bridge, so they were wrapped under it instead. The result made standard right-hand playing techniques tricky and unfamiliar, and palm muting was particularly difficult.

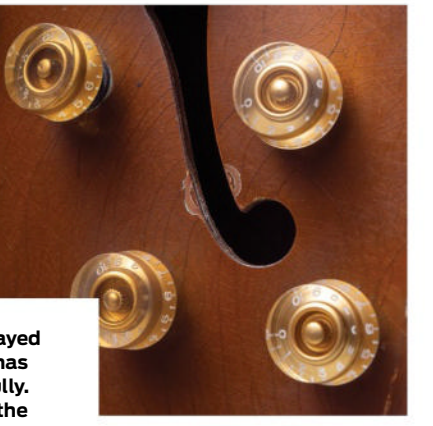
The ES-295, on the other hand, marks the first instance in which this piece of hardware was used correctly, as the traditionally steeper archtop neck angle

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

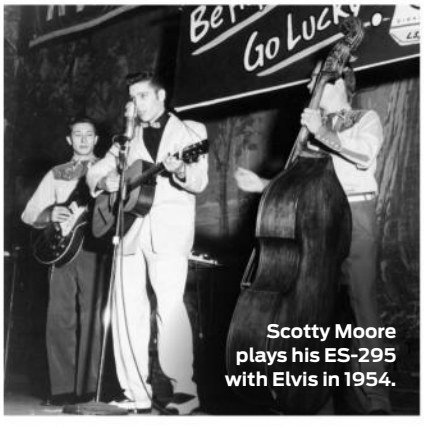
- Fully hollow archtop body
- Laminated maple top, back and sides
- Mahogany neck with bound rosewood fretboard, 24.75-inch scale
- Split-parallelogram inlays
- Combined wrapover bridge and trapeze tailpiece
- Dual P90 pickups

GUITAR COURTESY OF TR CRANDALL GUITARS. PHOTOS BY DREW GANSZ

BY DAVE HUNTER



This much-played 1952 ES-295 has aged beautifully. The finish on the back has begun to turn green due to oxidizing of the bronze flakes in the finish.



Scotty Moore plays his ES-295 with Elvis in 1954.

was maintained. As a result, the wrapover-trapeze combo came into its own, providing a means of mounting a sharper-sounding and longer-sustaining bridge on a hollow-body archtop guitar. This component would also be used on the thinline ES-225 model of 1955, but it disappeared from Gibson's parts drawer after the ES-295 went out of production in 1959.

With more ring and bite from its metal bridge bar, and a tighter, brighter tone available from the second P90 in the bridge position, the ES-295 was primed for the grind and sizzle that came to define the sound of rock and roll guitar. Even so, relatively few notable originators of the genre in the '50s used one, with so many other options hitting the market, and solidbodies, in particular, making inroads in the new style of music.

THE ES-295 WAS PRIMED FOR THE GRIND AND SIZZLE THAT CAME TO DEFINE THE SOUND OF ROCK AND ROLL GUITAR

Scotty Moore had already swapped his ES-295's Les Paul–designed hardware for an adjustable Gretsch Melita Synchro-Sonic and Gibson-style trapeze tailpiece by the time he was gigging it heavily with Elvis. He then traded the entire instrument for an upmarket Gibson L5-CESN in the summer of '55. This was arguably a move backward on the horses-for-courses spectrum as it relates to guitars suitable for rock and roll, but Moore made several classic recordings on the new archtop, nevertheless.

ROCK BEFORE ROCK

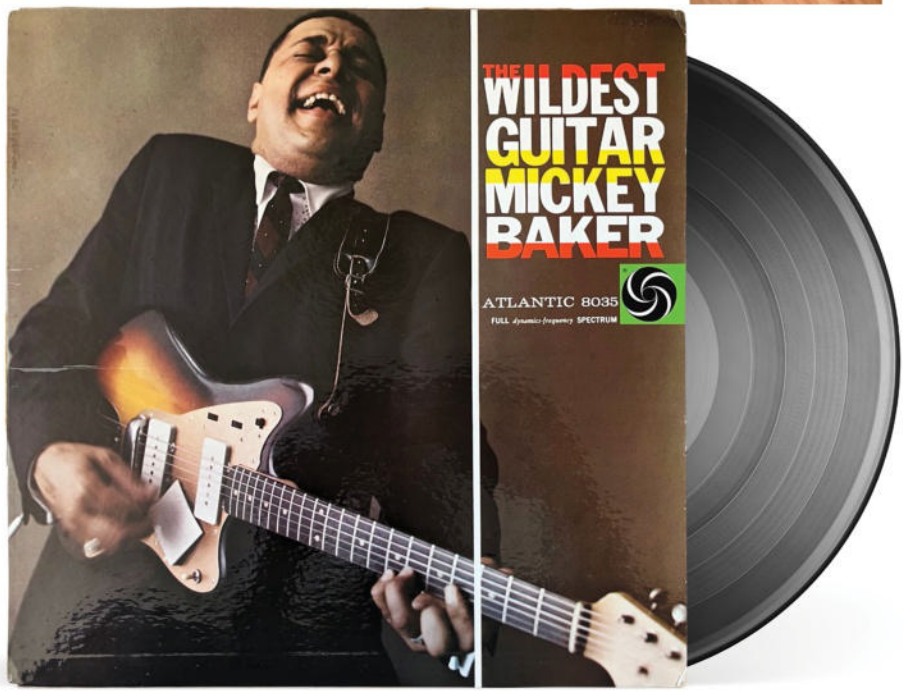
Notable guitarists who gravitated to the ES-295 in later years likely did so partly because it just looked so damn cool, with its all-gold paint, complementary cream plastics, split-parallelogram inlays and gold floral pickguard motif. What's more, original examples were actually pretty affordable on the vintage guitar market, unfashionable as they were for players other than rockabillies. And, of course, some just dug their alternative retro look. Danny Gatton, who could make anything with strings sound phenomenal, often played an ES-295 with added Bigsby vibrato when he wasn't playing a Telecaster. Geordie Walker of Killing Joke played an ES-295, very much against type, although its jazz-box build certainly didn't tamp down the band's power. Johnny Marr played one in the original promo video for the Smiths' "The Boy With the Thorn in His Side," although he was rarely seen with one otherwise. Regardless, one look at the example shown here is enough to induce gear lust in electric guitarists who like their rock and roll with a touch of class.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (MOORE)

BY JIM CAMPILONGO

Baker's Dozen

When it came to guitar instrumentals, no one served them hotter than **Mickey Baker**.



IN MY OPINION, Mickey Baker's *The Wildest Guitar* is in the top five of greatest album covers. I've stared at Mickey's face, I've analyzed what his left hand is fingering. I've looked to see if his Fender Jazzmaster is plugged in. And I've always wondered something else... But more on that later.

Beyond its cover, *The Wildest Guitar* also happens to be a great record. Mickey Baker's name might be like Mel Bay's to some of us. Before the internet, Baker's *Complete Course in Jazz Guitar* was one of the few books that unlocked some of the guitars' alluding mysteries, and it really helped me. His book aside, Mickey is also known for the 1956 hit "Love Is Strange," which he recorded with his wife as the duo Mickey and Sylvia.

But if Mickey had only released *The Wildest Guitar*, his name would still hold a place in guitar history. It's a relentless marathon that forces the listener to keep up over 12 blistering tracks. Its pace, intensity and overall concept are not for the squeamish or casual listener.

Released in 1959 on the Atlantic label, *The Wildest Guitar* features Abie Baker on bass, Pelton Evens on drums, Everett Barksdale on guitar, and Herman Foster on piano, with Mickey playing his Jazzmaster like there's no tomorrow. Mickey is credited for writing four of its songs — "Whistle Stop", "Midnight, Midnight," "Milk Train" and "Baker's Dozen" — but what's noteworthy is how even well-trodden tracks like "Lullaby of the Leaves" and "Autumn Leaves" are played with equal ferocity. *The Wildest Guitar* is a lull-free zone.

EVERYTHING IS EMBELLISHED BY WHAMMY-BAR FLOURISHES AND PLAYED WITH NO HOLDS BARRED

Side one kicks off with the "Third Man Theme," played with such ferocity that I can imagine Mickey downstroking forcefully, his strings moving downward in the saddles. Everything is embellished by whammy-bar flourishes and played with no holds barred. "Whistle Stop" is up next, with Mickey shredding over a classic blues groove. Song three is Cole Porter's "Night and Day," reimagined here with guitar slides, double-stops and flash over a militaristic accompaniment. On his own "Midnight, Midnight," Baker wrangles blues lines from his Jazzmaster in a style almost like Freddie King. An aggressive "Autumn Leaves" functions as the introspective piece here, as Mickey plays the melody with a voice-like quality, and with some minor 6th lines thrown in for good measure. "Baia" closes side one. Engineer Tom Dowd captures the song's surf-rock leanings with expertise, and I love Mickey's performance. This is the track I'd play for the uninitiated. It's got it all.

Side two opens with "Milk Train" jumping off the vinyl. "Old Devil Moon" follows with an almost Dick Dale approach, but unlike Dick, Mickey can play over changes. Baker and his band take no prisoners on "Chloe," and while, personally, I would have preferred a slow one to catch my breath, Mickey ups the ante with nonstop excitement. His original "Baker's Dozen" is a blues powerhouse that answers the question, "What if Jerry Lee Lewis played guitar?" Next up, Mickey re-imagines the classic "Lullaby of the Leaves" as a smoky minor blues before closing out with the high-energy encore "Gloomy Sunday."

Having studied Mickey Baker's *Complete Course in Jazz Guitar* in my teens and learned my first G major-7 grips, I had no idea that he could play like an unhinged wild man. *The Wildest Guitar* shows us this other side of the artist, but it's never dumb or beneath us. Mickey Baker was a great musician who played every note with muscle and heart.

As for that lingering question I mentioned: Can anyone tell me what is that thing that looks like a Post-It on Mickey's pickguard?

Look for the release of Jim Campilongo 4TET's new album, She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show, *in July 2024.*

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"This is modern instrumental music at its very best – essential!" **– John Zorn**

TZADIK

WITH THE FLOW

The vintage instruments and recording gear in his upstate New York studio let **Sam Evian** follow his muse where it leads. On *Plunge*, it swims in a wash of warm, overdriven guitars.

BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CJ HARVEY

THE CREEK THAT wraps around Sam Evian's analog recording studio/abode in New York's Catskills may rise only to his chest, but its influence on the singer/songwriter-guitarist's new power-pop album is immeasurably deep. The evidence is right there in the record's title: *Plunge* (Flying Cloud/Thirty Tigers).

"Last year, I was looking for a way to get through the winter blues, to kind of stimulate myself into making healthy decisions, and I learned about cold plunging," Evian explains. Cold-water immersion has long been touted as offering health benefits for mind and body. The stream running through his parcel offered Evian a ready source. "There are a lot of chemical reasons and benefits as to why it works and why it's good for you," he says. "It's super cold, and it's challenging to do it."

The fortitude required to take those chilling dunks went hand in hand with Evian's efforts to compose the cuts on *Plunge*, his fourth solo album. He found the practice helped to get him out of his comfort zone, stop self-medicating and focus on the music. That continued into the recording process, which he did with a selection of unusual guitars — including a 1962 Epiphone Sorrento — and a far-flung group of friends with whom he tracked his songs live, with minimal takes.

"This record is a plunge," he explains. "It's like we're diving in together, this group of people in a room, and putting it down on tape while it's fresh. So, yeah, it felt like the appropriate title: no headphones, no click track, live bleed in the room, early takes."

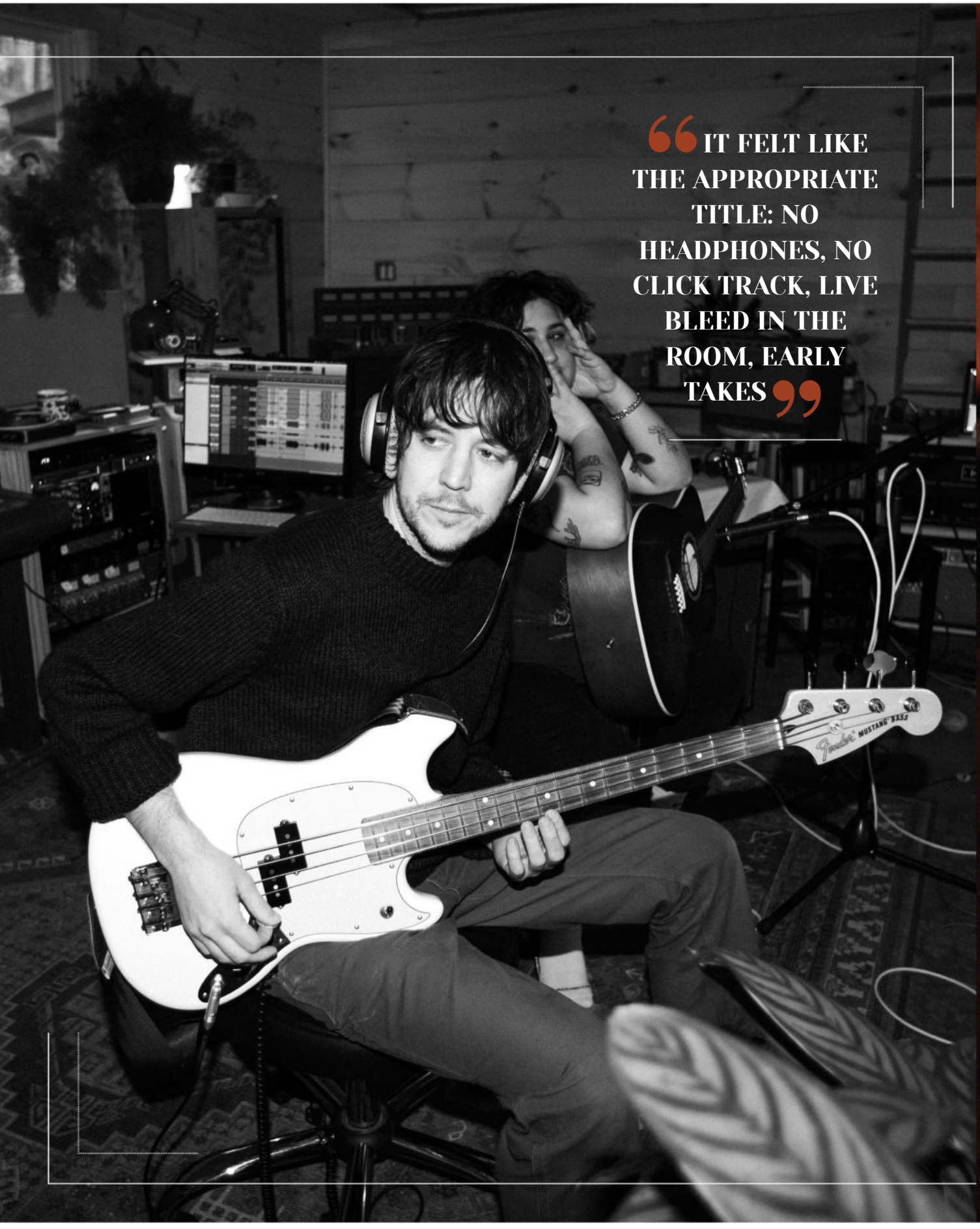
While it may not deliver a shock to the senses like a cold-water immersion, *Plunge* has a disorienting effect. Its warm, amber-hued tones make you wonder if you've stumbled upon some lost gem from the early 1970s. The low-fidelity production recalls the raw recordings of Paul McCartney's solo debut album, Pete Townshend's remarkable *Scoop* home demos, and, especially, Emitt Rhodes' wistfully sunny 1970 self-titled one-man masterwork. The nine cuts are almost all pushed along by crunchy overdriven riffs and melodic guitar hooks that worm in your ear long after the record finishes. "Wild Days," the lead track and single, features a circular chord progression pinned down by a percolating pedal tone, while "Rollin' In" floats on a smooth bed of California soft rock. Thick saturated drive seems to be Evian's stock-in-trade, and nowhere is it more evident than on the infectious "Why Does It Take So Long," where it extends from the song's insistent rhythm guitar riff to the fuzzed-out electric piano and guitar solos. Throughout the tuneful collection, Evian maintains a laidback vibe with a steady flow of hazy, dreamy tunes that might have drifted out of an AM radio some 50 years ago,

As it happens, he's as savvy behind the board as he is the guitar. Evian got his career on track in Brooklyn, both as a musician (with the jazz-pop indie-rock trio Celestial Shore, where he performed under his birth name, Sam Owens) and as an engineer/producer at Figure 8 Recording, the Prospect Heights facility launched by multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily.

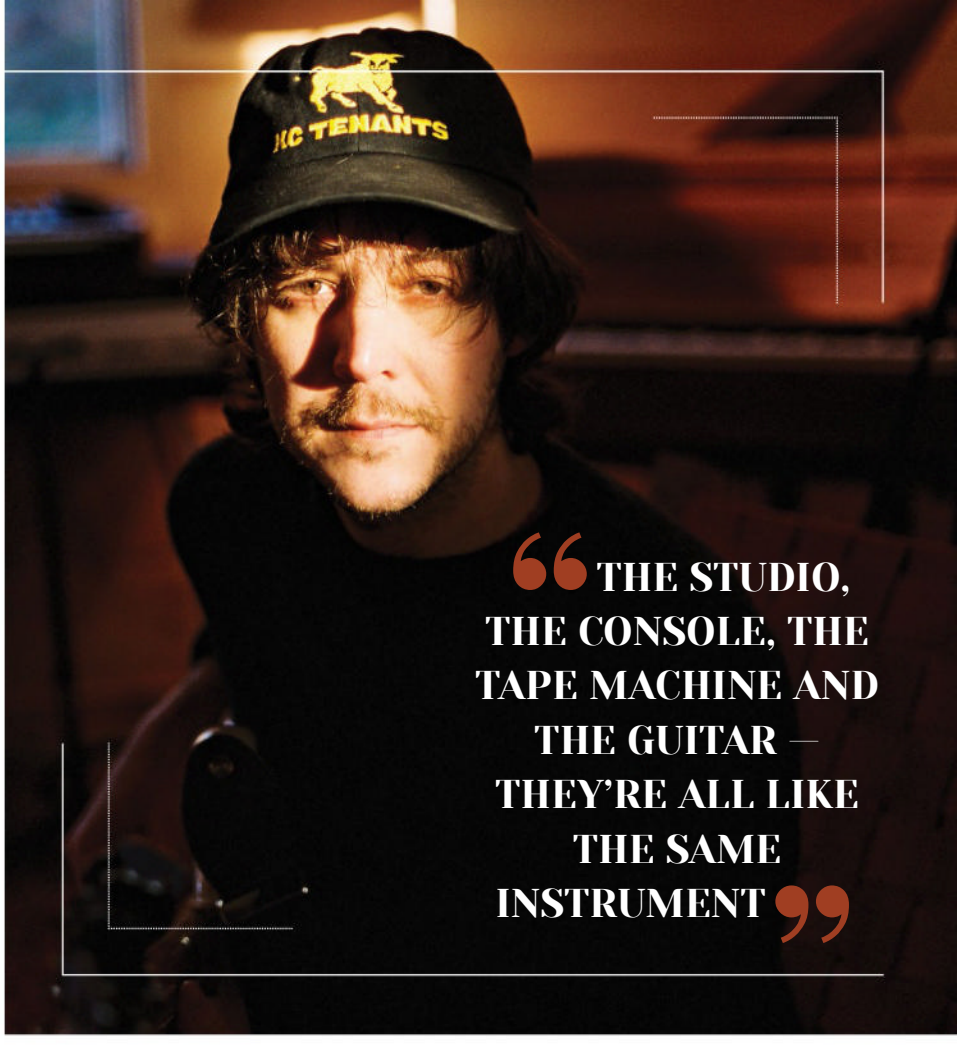
"I had a great community there, but it was a commercial studio and needed to have new clients every day and pay the rent," Evian says. "Shahzad would call you at, like, two in the morning and say, 'Hey, I have [*free-jazz pioneer*] Milford Graves coming in at six in the morning. Can you be here to record us?'"

Seeking more space and privacy for his music making, Evian moved to the Catskills in 2018, a good two years before the COVID pandemic sent New York City dwellers fleeing to those northern environs and made local real estate prices soar. "I got really lucky," Evian says, smiling. "I've never been so ahead of the curve in my life."

But the setting also suited him. "I'm a country person," he explains. "And I couldn't afford to do this in the city."



> “IT FELT LIKE THE APPROPRIATE TITLE: NO HEADPHONES, NO CLICK TRACK, LIVE BLEED IN THE ROOM, EARLY TAKES”



> **"THE STUDIO, THE CONSOLE, THE TAPE MACHINE AND THE GUITAR — THEY'RE ALL LIKE THE SAME INSTRUMENT"**

Now, when an idea comes to him, Evian can instantly get to work on it in his studio and bring in a troupe of fellow musicians to assist. "It's super productive," he affirms. "You have an idea and then, all of a sudden, it's a reality. I have people here working pretty much all the time, so when I'm not working on my own stuff, I have other artists here, recording. It's been a busy couple of years."

As anyone who watches the video for "Wild Days" will notice, Evian's studio is filled with vintage instruments and recording gear. Among the treasures is his Tascam 48 eight-track reel-to-reel deck, used for many of his previous recordings as well as *Plunge*. Before the sessions were completed, he managed to restore his MCI 16-track two-inch deck. "I wanted to use it so badly that, once I had the eight tracks down," he reveals, "I bumped those over to the 16-track and finished doing my vocals and overdubs that way."

For someone with so much experience in the digital recording realm, Evian finds analog tape satisfying in ways that go beyond retrogressive vintage-gear fandom. "I really love working on analog machines — eight- or 16-track — because it forces you to make decisions early," he says. "It's not necessarily a retro throwback; it's just a good way to make music, I think."

Evian's old-tech leanings don't apply as fully to guitar. On the one hand, there's his 1962 three-quarter-scale Epiphone Sorrento. "My dad was working at a guitar store in the early '90s and this guy came in and sold it to him for cheap," he explains. "My dad gave it to me because it was the perfect size. It has one P90 and it's amazing. And it's got this early '60s Epiphone neck. I've never seen anything like it."

But on *Plunge*, Evian also plays a Strat-style guitar based on a Cooder-caster that he and his friends built from Warmoth parts. "I actually had them put a Gibson-scale neck on a Strat-shaped body," Evian explains. "It's got a deep V, and I love that neck." Evian and his pals routed the pickups for Lollar gold-foil pickups. "They're hot and really full

bodied," he says "It's just a really good slide guitar." For effects, he plugged into an Origin Effects Cali76 compressor, a Wampler Tumnus and a Chase Bliss Warped Vinyl. "That pedal has a tonal imprint, even without the modulation effect," he says. "There's a tone-shaping knob that's either high-pass or low-pass. You can find a sweet spot where it takes out a little of the mud." It all ends up coming out of his Magnatone Twilighter, tracked with a Beyerdynamic M 160 ribbon mic and a Neve preamp.

In addition to guitar, Evian plays saxophone (his first instrument), some keyboards and bass on many tracks. The bass became his instrument of choice in part because he has many talented guitar friends who joined him on the recordings. They include Palehound singer/guitarist El Kempner, Chicago multi-instrumentalist Liam Kazar (whose credits include the Jeff and Spencer Tweedy outfit, Tweedy) and Big Thief singer/guitarist Adrianne Lenker.

But playing bass also suited Evian's role as producer and arranger. "I find myself in the bass chair a lot in the studio because it's kind of like the producer's instrument," he explains. "You can guide feel and tempo, and the melodies that you choose to play on the bass form the feel of the song a lot of times. So I really have been favoring it."

As a solo artist devoted to his studio space, Evian nods to the influence of predecessors like McCartney and, especially, Rhodes. "And then in the modern space, I'm such a fan of [*solo and former Deerhoof guitarist*] Chris Cohen, and I know he's always done his own studio work," he says. "And I like Tame Impala — Kevin [*Parker*] records himself. There's a great tradition of home recordists who built out their studio and are making records that way."

As Evian explains, it was home recording that spurred his interest in songwriting to begin with. "Because my first instrument was saxophone, I was more an instrumentalist and was really interested in arranging. That's why multitrack appealed to me — as a way to work out arrangements.

"And I guess it really goes back to my dad," he continues. "He's a jazz guitarist and he got into fusion in the '70s and into MIDI and Pat Metheny with the Roland [*GR-300*] guitar. He was an early adopter, so when I was growing up, there was always MIDI gear around. He got an early version of Logic and had a MIDI interface for it. So he would let me mess around and make my little MIDI arrangements.

"And it just kind of developed throughout my life. When I was living in New York, I thought, Maybe I could do this as a job. And I built it into a career."

Whether he's producing artists like Cass McCombs, folk musician Molly Sarlé or indie-rocker Anna Burch in his studio, Evian's intention is to satisfy his clients' sonic desires. "The person that I am when I'm working on other people's music is a lot different than the person I am when I'm working on my own," Evian explains. "The recording business, it's about hospitality. I'm running a retreat hotel for musicians and totally catering to them and their comforts. And I love doing that, but it's like it's a tailored version of myself.

"And so, on *Plunge*. I got to be the manic hurricane person who has ideas and needs to put them down."

To that end, Evian took a cue from a tried-and-true source of inspiration: the Beatles, specifically, Peter Jackson's 2021 documentary, *Get Back*. "In the film, when the group gets to Apple [*Studios*] and Billy Preston shows up, [*producer*] Glyn Johns really comes into his own finding the sounds, and it just glues everything together. And the Beatles start pulling magic out of the ether.

"And I noticed that there were no headphones; they were singing live through a PA in the room, with no isolation between the instruments. I found that really inspiring, and it was a reaffirmation for me that that's how I want to structure sessions at my studio. I'm really allergic to a modern recording studio, where there's a lot of glass and isolation. That's not to say you can't make good music in that environment, because obviously you very much can. But I do find a special corner of creativity when the space is open, like it was in the *Get Back* sessions."

His studio's unobstructed layout certainly had an impact on *Plunge*'s songs, some of which changed shape in the hands of other musicians. Evian's demos — "I always make a demo of a song once I get it down" — provided the musicians with a basic template for the songs. "But on this record, I really wanted to let the songs go where the musicians would take them," he says.

The result is an album that sounds warm, welcoming and immersive, punctuated by moments of inspired guitar work and sonic delight. *Plunge* shows what happens when musical talent is given the space and means to work freely with the technology of choice. As Evian explains, the boundaries between them blur, resulting in bracing sensory experiences not unlike the jolt of a cold-river plunge.

"You know, my toolbox in the studio is pretty well burned in at this point, so I don't really have to think too deeply about technical decisions," he reveals. "I can just flow. And when I hit the flow state in the studio, the console, the tape machine and the guitar — they're all like the same instrument. It doesn't happen that way all the time, but when it does, it's really special. And I can kind of just go with it."

"THE GUITAR TURNED OUT TO BE MY SAVIOR"

5

BEING JOHN 5

In his most personal and revealing interview ever, **John 5** explains how fear of flying, OCD and a string of personal tragedies shaped him to become the guitar virtuoso he is today.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN ROSENSTEIN

GUITAR CAPTIONS BY KEN SHARP

ONE MIGHT NOT think that Dolly Parton, Rob Zombie, k.d. lang and Nikki Sixx would share any kind of common ground, but there is something they all emphatically agree on: John 5 is one of the most creative and exciting guitar players they have ever encountered. They're just some of the music stars who sing the praises of the Telecaster-toting axe ace in the new documentary ***I Am John 5***. The film also includes glowing testimonials from the likes of Joe Satriani, Rob Halford, the late Gary Rossington, Peter Criss, Michael Anthony and Rudy Sarzo, among others.

All of which has the subject of the movie feeling vaguely verklempt. "It's so strange and unbelievable to me," John 5 says. "Everything that's happened to me has exceeded all of my wildest dreams. When I was starting out, I was just hoping to make a living as a session player. I never thought I'd sign an autograph, let alone have Dolly Parton talking about me. I still have a hard time trying to fathom where life has taken me."

As success stories go, John 5's tale is pretty spectacular stuff. Arriving in Los Angeles in the late '80s from his hometown of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, the 17-year-old guitarist (born John Lowery) quickly found work playing on movie and TV soundtracks, followed by album sessions for Rick Springfield and David Lee Roth. He played live dates with his friend Lita Ford, but owing to a long-standing fear of planes, he preferred studio dates and travel that didn't involve flying, until he signed on with k.d. lang for a world trek from 1996 to '97. Enthralled by Marilyn Manson, he reached out to the shock rocker, who hired him and rechristened him John 5. Donning elaborate costumes and goth-horror makeup that suited his new moniker, John 5 became Manson's onstage foil and right-hand man. A pair of studio albums (2000's *Holy Wood* and 2003's *The Golden Age of Grotesque*) and several world tours followed before they parted company in 2004.

John 5's next longtime gig — with heavy-metal/horror star and sometime filmmaker Rob Zombie — took him even higher. In addition to his blitzing guitar chops, John 5 served as a significant writing partner on a series of Zombie's albums and even wrote the score to the singer's supernatural thriller, *The Lords of Salem*. Their mutually beneficial professional relationship seemed destined to continue, but in 2022, John 5 received the kind of offer he couldn't — and didn't — refuse: taking over for Mick Mars in Mötley Crüe.

I Am John 5 traces the broad strokes of his career in a fast-paced and highly entertaining film directed by Chantal Savage, and produced by the guitarist, Mike Savage and Barry Pointer. But some of its most illuminating segments recount the earliest chapters of John 5's

FENDER ESQUIRE

This 1966 Esquire sports Fender's spaghetti logo, which by this year had been almost completely phased out in favor of the company's thicker gold-and-black transition logo. "This Esquire is very close to me because it was the first vintage guitar I owned and served as my introduction to vintage guitars," John explains. "I bought it from Norman's Rare Guitars in Tarzana, California, and I used it on my first two instrumental records. It's very precious to me, and even though I've used it a lot, I've taken good care of it."

life, particularly how, as a preternaturally gifted teenaged guitarist, already versed in country and bluegrass (thanks to the TV comedy show *Hee Haw*) as well as rock (thanks to Kiss), he struck a deal with his mother to play nightclubs — none of which he could legally patronize — as long as his schoolwork didn't suffer.

"I was always very driven and was strict with myself about playing, but I followed other rules, too," he says. "My mom said, 'If you miss school, if you don't get up in the morning even one time, you're not going to play these clubs anymore.' Truth is, I thought that was a very smart rule, even though I sometimes got home at two in the morning and had to get up by seven. But I never missed a day of school. I was always respectful of things like that. Plus, my mom knew that I wasn't drinking or smoking or doing anything." (Apparently, "or doing anything" didn't include occasionally going home with much older waitresses that he met in the clubs.)

I Am John 5 isn't mere rock-star idolatry, however. When he agreed to participate in the project, John 5 made it clear to the producers that he wasn't interested in a standard-issue puff piece, and in several particularly powerful segments he reveals his struggles with mental illness that he says began back in 2003, after he received word that his sister Lynne had died. "I was on tour with Manson, and I knew that my father was sick with cancer," he explains. "Lynne and my father weren't talking because she was involved with drugs. But he was really sick, so she went home to make peace with him. She was on methadone, and she died." The new film features footage of a dramatic onstage moment from 2003 when John 5, still reeling from his sister's passing, threw down his guitar and confronted Manson in a fit of rage and anguish.

The guitarist hadn't yet processed her death when his sister Denise succumbed to cancer, followed by the cancer deaths of his mother and father. More tragedies followed: His best friend and guitar tech, Ruben Valesco, died, and soon after, his brother-in-law Dennis passed on. "It made me crazy," John 5 says. "It started when I was with Manson, and it went on while I was with Zombie. As anyone knows, it's traumatic to lose a family member, but I had all of these deaths in a short period of time. I didn't know what was going on. I was in a tailspin."

"I HAD ALL OF THESE DEATHS IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS GOING ON. I WAS IN A TAILSPIN"

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He started to experience panic attacks, which manifested themselves in breathing issues and digestive problems. At times, he was so mentally and physically overwhelmed that he couldn't get out of bed. Resisting self-medication — "My parents smoked and drank, and Lynne did drugs," John says. "The thought didn't cross my mind" — he finally turned to therapy. "I was trying to block things out, and my therapist said I needed to try to occupy my brain in some other way," he says. "The guitar turned out to be my savior."

Playing the guitar obsessively came naturally to John 5 (he claims that he's never gone a day without the instrument in his hands), but in an effort to alleviate his grief, he played even more than usual. He began to record solo albums at a steady clip. Starting with 2004's

SINNER TELECASTER

Featuring artwork by an artist John declines to identify, this custom Telecaster bears a design based on the cover of his 2021 album, *Sinner*. "This guitar also lights up," John explains. "I just keep this one for songwriting. I call it my 'couch guitar.' I just play and write with it. "

GOLDIE TELECASTER

"Goldie has probably been on more songs and to more shows any other guitar I own," John reveals. "This was my number one guitar, and I played it all day and all night. It's been refretted already once. The metal pickguard has been replaced twice because I played it so much that I dug a groove in there, which indented the metal. Fender saw that and said, 'This isn't good for you. This could get in your skin.' I mean, I just played it so, so much."

Vertigo and on through 2021's *Sinner*, he's released 10 albums that show off his astonishing, multigenre-blending guitar style (everything from hyperspeed chicken pickin' to molten-metal shred).

Little by little, John has gained perspective on what at one time felt like an unending nightmare. He occasionally checks in with a therapist for tune-ups, but he says he feels healthier and happier than he has in years. He remains tight with his surviving sister, Mary Kay, who turns up at various points in *I Am John 5*. (In one fun scene, the two drive by the guitarist's old high school football field. Reminiscing about how he was never accepted by the jocks, he laughs, "I'll show you!") John and his wife, Rita, just celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary, and he's still pinching himself over his membership in the

"THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO DO WITH THE FILM — INSPIRE PEOPLE TO TURN NEGATIVE ENERGY INTO SOMETHING POSITIVE"

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Crüe. Between touring and recording with the band, he's carved out some time to record a new solo song for *I Am John 5* called "Hollywood Story." A luminous instrumental rock ballad, brimming with wondrous melodies and jaw-dropping chops, it encapsulates his compositional and virtuoso skills in one sparkling four-minute package.

More than anything, John hopes the documentary can provide a kind of public service. "Even though the film is about me, I'm not going, 'Look at me! Look at me!'" he says. "What I really want to do is shine a light on my experiences and show people who want to get into this business, or even people who might be dealing with mental illness, that you can go after your dreams. You can get through things without drugs and alcohol. There is hope. It's possible to pick up the pieces and keep going. That's what I'm trying to do with the film — inspire people to turn negative energy into something positive."

In the documentary, you say that one of the main reasons why you wanted to be a session guitar player was because you feared flying. How did you get over it?

I'm still not over it. It started in the '70s, when I had this horrible flight to Palm Springs. We went through this storm, and it went on forever. It felt like somebody was shaking me back and forth, and it wouldn't end. I was so sick. Ever since then, I haven't liked to travel.

When I joined Mötley Crüe, I found out they took private planes everywhere. So I told them, "I'm not good on those things," and they were like, "Ah, it'll be fine." The first tour we did in South America, we had this massive plane — 600 seats or something. We had our road crew and Def Leppard and their crew. There was a problem with the landing gear, and we had to dump the fuel. It was a nightmare. But you know, you just gotta do what you gotta do. I tell myself, It's fine, it's safe. I have to remind myself and just do it.

If k.d. lang hadn't asked you to go out on tour, do you think you would have stuck to your initial plan and stayed a session guitar player?

Well, I'd done some touring, but not a real tour where you have a tour manager and a real everything. I was doing sessions and Lita Ford asked if I'd do some live shows. I said, "Yeah, sure." So if an opportunity was there, I would take it. But k.d. lang was my first real

"DURING THE CONFRONTATION, MARILYN SAID, 'PICK YOUR GUITAR UP! DON'T BRING YOUR FAMILY INTO THIS' "

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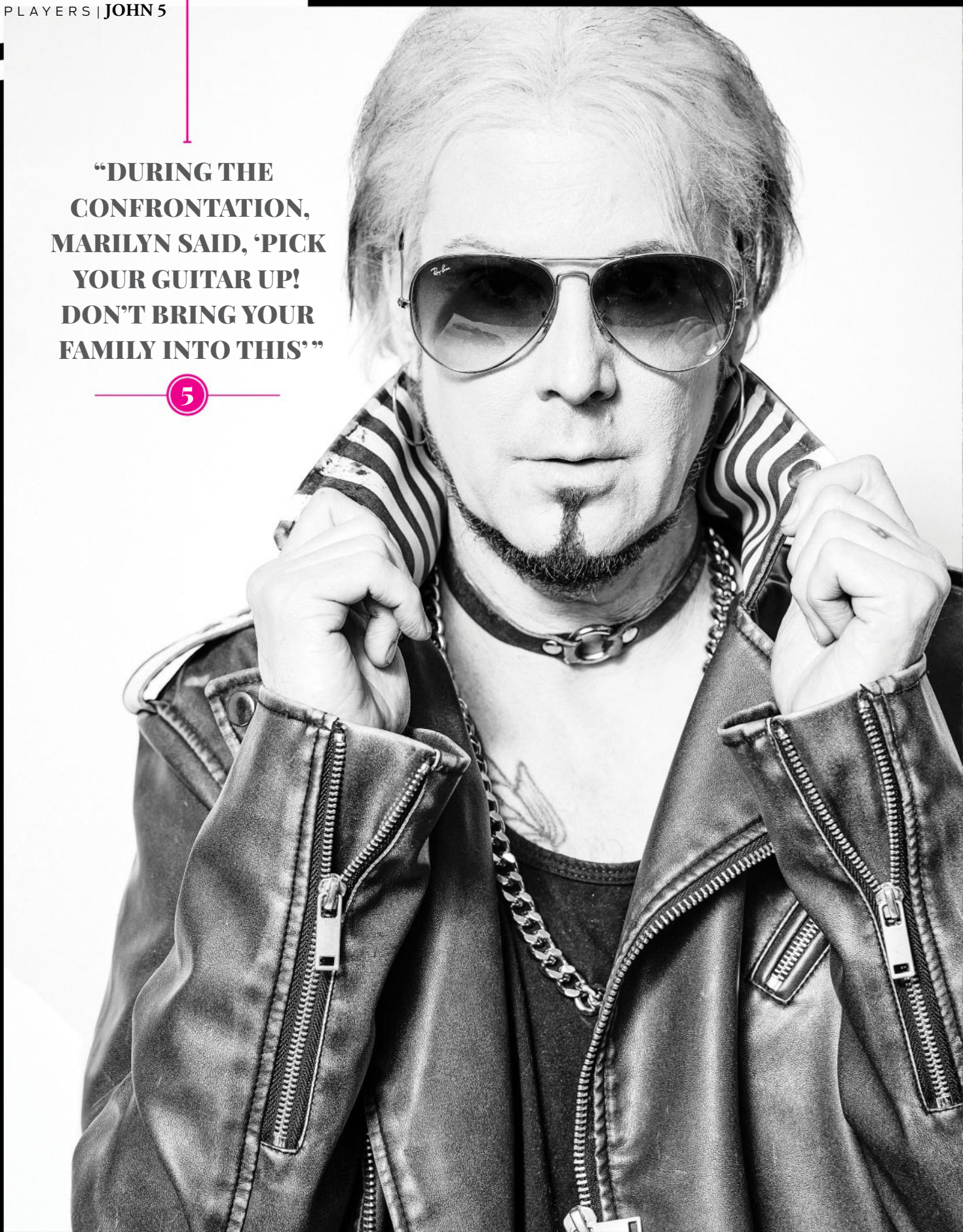


GHOST NUMBER ONE

"As I said, I used to play Goldie all the time, but it was really getting old and beat up. But now Ghost Number One has taken its place, and it's all I play. It's my number one guitar." In development since 2019, the Ghost has an electronics complement of two DiMarzio D Activator pickups, a master volume and a kill switch. John gave the prototype its debut on his 2022 summer and fall tours. It hasn't left his side since. "I'm using it on the new Mötley Crüe music, and I've used it on all of my new songs . There's just a magic behind that guitar."

professional tour, and boy, did I get thrown into the deep end. She had guests coming to the show — Madonna, Peter Gabriel. It was a trip.

In the film, you say that there hasn't been a single day in which you haven't played guitar. You also mention having OCD.
Correct.

Do you see any correlation there?
Oh, sure! I mean, I play the guitar and I clean the house. That's what I do — I play and I clean. I'm just being honest. I mop and sweep and clean the toilets. It's very rewarding. I make the beds and do everything you can imagine.

Does your OCD. ever get into a dangerous or unhealthy lane? You know what I mean...
That's a fine question. What I do is, I'll play guitar for four hours, and then I'll stop and I'll clean the house for a couple hours. But it doesn't get dangerous. I mean, I'm not on my hands and knees looking at a speck.

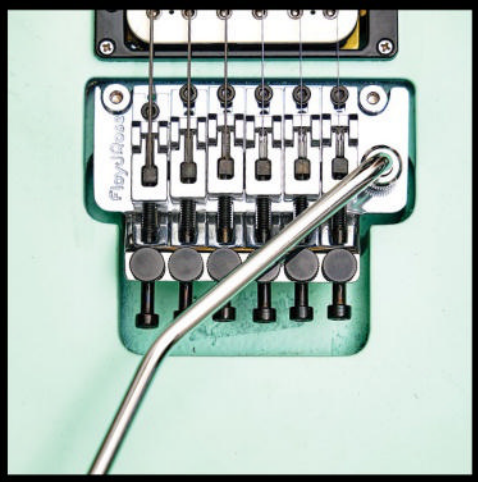
Okay, so you're not like Howard Hughes.
I love Howard Hughes. To me, it's rewarding when I can look at a room and be like, "Oh, I feel good about this." And I'm active. If I'm home playing guitar, I'm just sitting there, but I'm moving around when I'm cleaning. It's kind of healthy. I get in my 10,000 steps every day.

As a kid, you assiduously mimicked players you saw on *Hee Haw* — people like Buck Owens and Roy Clark. In hindsight, do you feel as if there was any sort of compulsive behavior behind that, or were you just having fun?
I don't know, but it's a good question. I was so young. Thinking about it now, I just had to get my guitar lesson down, even if it meant staying up all night. If I couldn't figure something out, I would keep at it. I would fake being sick, and I'd play guitar until I got it. That happened quite a bit, so that could be a tendency, I guess.

How about the outrageous costumes and makeup you came to wear? Was it a way of overcoming shyness or social anxiety? Did it give you confidence?
I believe so. I was very confident onstage with a guitar in my hand, but not confident at school because I put so much attention into music and guitar. When I was onstage, I had it down, so I was going to be confident. I'm confident talking to you, and you're confident talking to me because you've been doing this for many years. But if we were going to talk about math, we would both be nervous about it.

We would be, because I can't do math at all. [*John laughs*] Let's stay on the idea of music as emotional therapy. In a way, do you think this started earlier in your life, say, when you were a teenager?
It's funny — I've heard a lot of artists speak about having tough childhoods. I had an incredible childhood, like something out of Norman Rockwell. I just loved to play guitar. I loved anything that was done very well. If it was sports or someone riding a bike or music or anything, I was obsessed with anyone doing something to the pinnacle. And, of course, I was through the roof when it came to people who were unbelievable on the guitar.

The footage of you losing it onstage, throwing down your guitar and going after Marilyn Manson is harrowing. The two of you had always play-acted off each other, but this time it was very real.
I hadn't slept for days and days. I was in a state of shock. I don't even know how I was playing a show, but I wasn't tired. That's how strange it all was. I was probably up for five days. When that

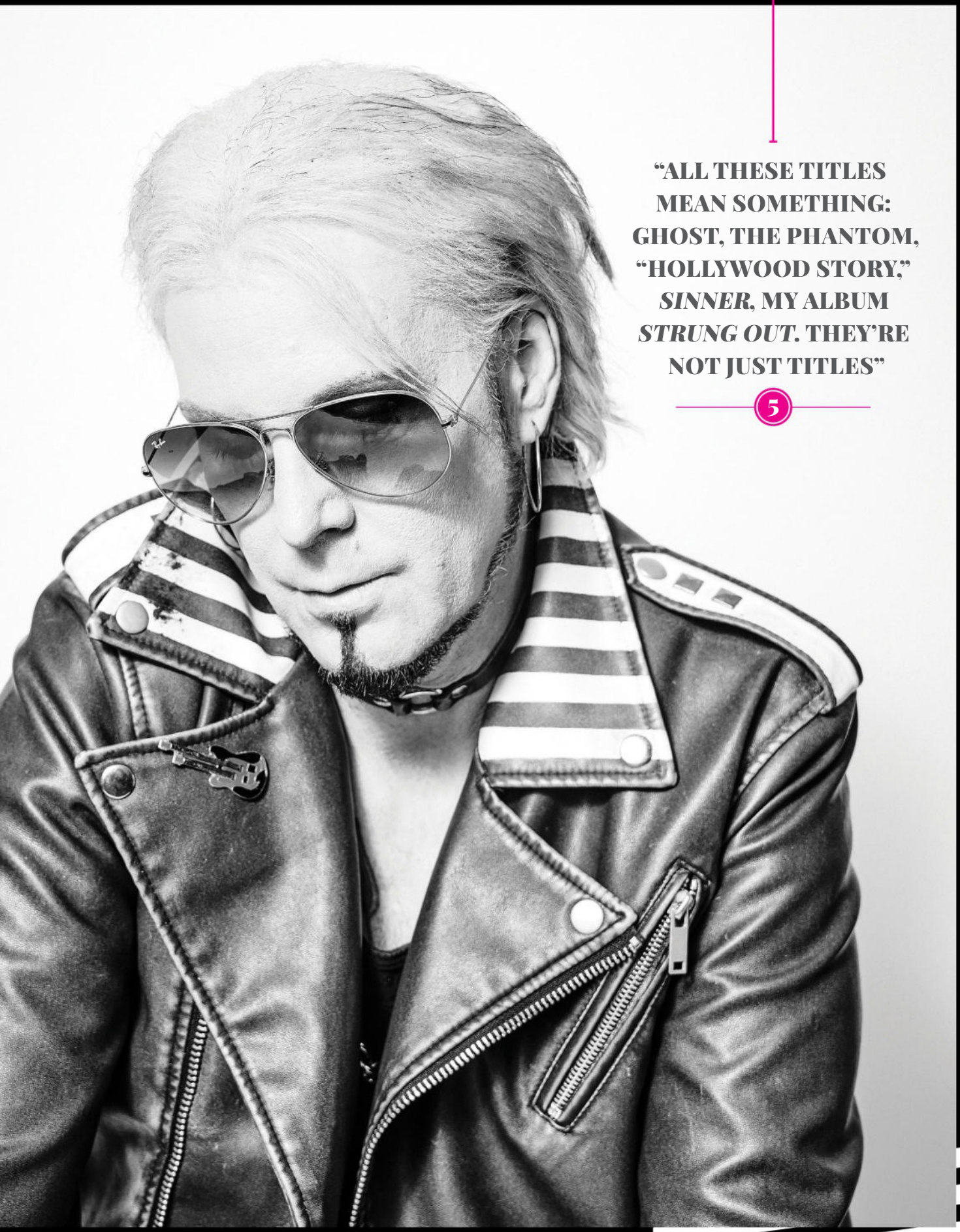


CUSTOM FENDER TELECASTER

This custom job features the by-now familiar complement of DiMarzio pickups, a master volume and kill switch. "This was designed for the Mötley Crüe shows, and I also use it in my shows as well," John explains. As for the finish? "Sea Foam Green is my absolute favorite color. I have this similar thing about Tobacco Burst Les Pauls. There's just something about the look of that I love. I think this is just a beautiful, beautiful instrument."

FENDER STRAT

"I got this guitar for Christmas when I was 12 years old , and it was my very first real guitar. I started playing guitar at around seven years old, but I didn't really have a good guitar until I got this. I took care of it like it was a piece of gold — like it was a baby. I washed my hands before I played it. I put it back in its case after I played it. I just took very, very good care of it. And it shows."



"ALL THESE TITLES MEAN SOMETHING: GHOST, THE PHANTOM, "HOLLYWOOD STORY," *SINNER*, MY ALBUM *STRUNG OUT*. THEY'RE NOT JUST TITLES"

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GHOST NUMBER TWO

"Ghost Number Two was created when I joined Mötley Crüe," John explains. "My original Ghost doesn't have a vibrato, and Mick Mars used a Floyd Rose or a tremolo on most of the Crüe's songs, so Ghost Number Two was born." Like its companion, the guitar is used "on every Mötley Crüe song live and in the studio as well," John says. "It's just as important as Ghost Number One, but I don't use it as much outside of Mötley Crüe because I don't like to rely on a tremolo; I prefer to do everything with just my hands."

LED TELE

"A guy named Ken Meyer made this guitar for me. He came up to me at a NAMM show and said, 'I'll make you any guitar you want.' I didn't know him but he seemed to be a nice person. I said, 'Okay. I want a guitar with LEDs on the front.' And he said, 'I can do it.' And sure enough, he did. I've been using that guitar for close to 20 years. It plays incredibly. So hats off to Ken!"

1971 BLONDE TELECASTER

"I had to get it because it reminded me of Steve Cropper, and I've always loved him," John says of this vintage beauty. "A lot of my heroes played Telecasters, including those pickers on *Hee Haw*. I thought this was the only shape an electric guitar came in. Because it's in mint condition and all original, I don't take it out much at all."

incident happened, it wasn't out of spite or anger or anything Marilyn did. I just snapped. It was so strange. During the confrontation, he said, "Pick your guitar up! Don't bring your family into this."

Did he apologize afterward for saying that?
Oh, of course. Yeah, he was… It was just terrible, and I feel bad about it. It was captured on film, but what can you do?

When you sought professional help, your therapist told you to try working through your grief by burying yourself in an activity, and, not surprisingly, you chose the guitar.
Yeah. I never did an instrumental record before then. I became obsessed with instrumental records — that's all I listened to — and I was like, Okay, I'm going to do an instrumental record. I started out not so crazy with *Vertigo*, and then it became gradually crazier and more intense. Look at the album titles: Vertigo is something my mom had when she was really sick. *Songs for Sanity* was the second one — there you go. *The Devil Knows My Name*: I always thought I had a curse on me because of all the things that were happening. *Requiem*, *God Told Me To* — it all ties in.

Did it ever come up in therapy that obsessive guitar playing was a way of hiding from your feelings? Was there the understanding that you had to confront your feelings in some other way?
Of course. And, of course, I dealt with it that way, as well. It still affects me today — completely. I'll feel it creeping in. But I'll say to myself, I know who you are. I know what you are, and I'm going to overcome this.

You occasionally go back for therapy?
Yes, on and off. But you know, you can get through it by doing positive things, and by doing things that will inspire people and help them. If my music helps people just a little bit, then I feel like I did my job. I do my solo tours. There was a little girl who was really ill with cancer. She was very young and in rough shape. She came to the show, and I brought her up onstage and the place went nuts. Four years later, she came back and she's doing great. I brought her up onstage and the crowd went crazy. It was great.

That is what it's all about.
Yeah. Like I said, experiences like that make me feel like I did my job.

Speaking of jobs, let's talk about Mötley Crüe. You and I talked recently, and you said you were starting to record new music with them.
That's right — new music! We went into the studio with [*producer*] Bob Rock and did some songs. It was really cool because it's something I haven't done before. We all got in the room together and played, and that's how we tracked. It's so unorthodox nowadays to just get in one room and play all at the same time and record at the same time. It was incredible.

Are you "John 5-ing" the music in some way? You're coming in with riffs and song ideas?
Yeah. And it's incredible because, I mean, Nikki Sixx — and I'm not just saying this — he's such an incredible writer and lyricist. It's natural for him. He'll call me and say, "Dude, check this out," and it's so good. I'm like, Oh, my God. How could my friend, somebody I go to the mall with, grab something out of thin air

EVH STRAT

"This is a guitar Eddie Van Halen gave to me when these guitars first came out, and I was just absolutely blown away that he did it," John says, clearly still awestruck by the experience. "My hero gave me one of his guitars, and he was so proud of it as well. That was a time I'll never forget, and I cherish this guitar."

like this? And it'll be really, really great. Being with him and the other guys, and working with these people that really know how to write great songs, is an incredible experience.

Your new song "Hollywood Story" is great stuff. I like the shred flash in the riff — it's a motif throughout the song, but it changes a little each time.
That's right. It's interesting because it is shreddy, and the song is midtempo. If the song were up-tempo with the same guitar stuff, you'd be like, "Whoa, this is really intense." But when it's a midtempo song with that nice groove, and it's still shredding, it's like you're listening to a piece of classical music, where the violin is gorgeous, beautiful and fluid. The violin is moving, but it's not distracting because it's so fluid. You don't really notice that it's really flying all over the place. That's kind of what I tried to accomplish with this piece.

"IF I COULDN'T FIGURE SOMETHING OUT, I WOULD KEEP AT IT. I WOULD FAKE BEING SICK, AND I'D PLAY GUITAR UNTIL I GOT IT"

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Sonically, it's very pleasing to the ear.
It starts out with bass and a nice melody — it's very primitive and elementary. It's just acoustic guitar and a distorted electric guitar tone, but I didn't make it harsh. I made it very warm and smooth. It's got some crazy-cool stuff in it. There's a diminished chord in it. There's a flat five!

What kinds of effects did you use on "Hollywood Story"?
Just a Boss Super Overdrive and an EVH head.

I understand you have a new Fender signature model coming out that's based on the Ghost Telecaster.
I do, but I'm not talking about it that much. I mean, I'll talk to you about it. The Ghost has been very successful, and this new one is called the Phantom. It's black and it's gorgeous. I'm trying to get it in my hands soon. You know, all these titles mean something: Ghost, the Phantom, "Hollywood Story," *Sinner*, my album *Strung Out*. They're not just titles.

Anything about the spec or design you can tell me about the Phantom?
It's going to be all black anodized, like a darker pickguard, but metal. We're going to have a Floyd Rose on it, but there will be one that comes without a Floyd. Like the Ghost, it will have binding, of course. I just can't wait to get my hands on it so I can road test it. That's what I did with the Ghost — I road tested it for so long, because when I put something out, I want it to be the best, and I want people to be happy with it. If my name is associated with it, I want it to be incredible. And with Fender, it always is.

Obviously, the guitar has a Floyd Rose because you've been using one with Mötley Crüe.
Yeah, so I need it. At first, I was like, "What makes this thing work?" I mean, my first guitar was a Stratocaster [*see page 52*]. I loved Hendrix, so I was "experienced." [*laughs*] I played with a whammy bar, but then I got away from it because I didn't want it to be a crutch. I don't want to offend anyone who uses one. I'm just being honest. This is the most honest interview I've ever done.

ANOTHER SIDE OF MOLLY MILLER

She revels in her jazz chops on *The Battle of Hotspur*. But as this doctor of musical arts explains, it's just one facet of her myriad guitar talents.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNA AZAROV

MOLLY MILLER IS working overtime this summer. Yes, she's reprising her role in pop star Jason Mraz's Superband, on tour for his latest release, *Mystical Magical Rhythmical Radical Ride*, on which she also appears. But she'll have to get there early as she's also the opening act, performing with her Molly Miller Trio in support of their engaging new record, *The Battle of Hotspur* (Interrabang Records). Recorded with her bandmates, bassist Jennifer Condos and drummer Jay Bellerose, it's a vibrant collection of original, instrumental Americana jazz songs tinged with folk, surf rock and Ennio Morricone–inspired western soundscapes.

On its face, this may seem an unlikely musical pairing: a jazz trio opening for a major pop star. But Miller — who is also an adjunct professor of studio guitar at her alma mater, University of Southern California, where she earned a Doctorate in Musical Arts — doesn't see herself as simply a jazz guitarist.

"Hendrix is the guy that got me into guitar," she tells *Guitar Player*, speaking from her home in Los Angeles. "Sure, I'm a jazz guitarist, but that feels like it's not the whole truth. It's just a part of what I do."

MILLER BEGAN PLAYING GUITAR AT AGE SEVEN, JOINING HER SIBLINGS IN A FAMILY BAND.

She counts among her inspirations such disparate artists as the Beach Boys and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the gospel legend and rock guitar pioneer on whom she would later write her dissertation. Videos on Miller's YouTube channel (@mollymillermusic) range from her beautiful solo guitar version of "When You Wish Upon a Star" (released on her 2020 album, *Disney Guitar: The Molly Miller Sessions*, as part of the Disney Peaceful Guitar series) to her trio playing a dynamite cover of J.J. Cale's "After Midnight" and a host of other ingeniously arranged pop and jazz standards. (And if you're looking for a lesson on CAGED theory, Miller's YouTube tutorials can't be beat.)

There's a visceral and personal depth to Miller's playing and songwriting on *Hotspur*, and her tone is *big*. On the cusp of embarking with her trio on a month-long series of dates preceding the Mraz tour, she took time out to chat with *Guitar Player* about practice, hybrid picking and trusting yourself as a guitarist.

***The Battle of Hotspur* almost sounds like it could be a recording of a live show.**

That was totally the goal. We wanted to make the record sound how it did live. Jason [*Wormer, recording and mix engineer*] actually went to one of our gigs and said, "This is the first time I've ever recorded a band, mixed the record and gone to a show, and it all sounds the same," and I was, like, "That's what we wanted!"

We recorded the whole thing in two days, and it wasn't two crazy-long days. We'd do one or two takes, listen back to make sure everything sounded like we wanted it to, go back and do a couple more takes, and that was it. There are very minimal overdubs — maybe I had a note I didn't like — but it's pretty much exclusively a live record, except for some percussion and production.

"SURE, I'M A JAZZ GUITARIST, BUT THAT FEELS LIKE IT'S NOT THE WHOLE TRUTH. IT'S JUST A PART OF WHAT I DO"

Your guitar sound is so full that it almost doesn't sound like a trio at times. How did you get such a big tone?

Jason is a guitar player. He brought his pedalboard and I brought mine, and he did a split at the top. I had two boards going to two different amps, so I could have two completely isolated sounds simultaneously. I was using my pedalboard on my Princeton '65 reissue and Jason's on a Vibrolux. One was set a little cleaner, closer to what I would do at a gig, and the other had more stuff on it. Then we'd blend the two sounds.

He had different pedals than I did. I had the Strymon Flint for tremolo, EarthQuaker Devices Dispatch Master for reverb and delay — I used that one a ton — and Special Cranker overdrive, and the Chase Bliss Audio Dark World reverb. Jason's board had a Diamond Compressor, a Flint on the '70s reverb setting, slapback from the Malekko Ekko, the Keeley Monterey [*Rotary Fuzz Vibe*] and a modded Behringer Ultra Vibrato set to a slow rate.

How about guitars?

My 1978 Gibson ES-335 — that's my baby. I used that and my Tele for most of the record. I used my goldtop P90s Les Paul on one song, "Cine."

A few of your songs give a nod to Ennio Morricone's scores for '60s westerns.

Totally, though we didn't want to be too on the nose. I thought of Mickey Baker, Booker T. & the M.G.'s, Dave Brubeck, plus Afrobeat — [*Nigerian drummer and composer*] Tony Allen's drums definitely inspired "66 West." We're nodding to the past while trying to make something relevant, but in a timeless sense. Jen said, "I want to make a make a western concept record," and a bunch of the songs, like "Orchids and Cowboys" and "Cine," were very much inspired by Morricone's music, like [*his score for the 1966 western*] *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, and that kind of stuff.

When you're writing, do you start from a groove, or do you have a melodic idea first?

I write in a couple of different ways.

"I THINK SO MUCH OF LEARNING ON YOUR INSTRUMENT — AND MAYBE IT'S A METAPHOR FOR LIFE — IS ABOUT THE EXPLORATION"

I play guitar every day, and I feel like I'm such a "guitar player," where I sit down and explore the instrument, how a melody and harmony can interact. I love exploring that. So some of it is playing guitar and exploring, like "Blues to Greens." Then there are songs that are coming from emotional places of me just sitting with my guitar, dealing with relationships or sadness stemming from the pandemic.

But writing also comes from discovering. I love guitar and how chords sound and what happens if you bring the melody down to a different octave or you go to a new key. I think so much of learning on your instrument — and maybe it's a metaphor for life — is about the exploration. Sometimes as a student I would be so goal oriented, like, "I have to learn all these scales." But how you really get better is by exploring. So, writing will be a combination of the discovery process and emotion for me, and trying to make sense of my feelings. I feel sometimes that playing guitar is way better than a therapy session. *Oh, I'm angry!* You can exaggerate that on your instrument.

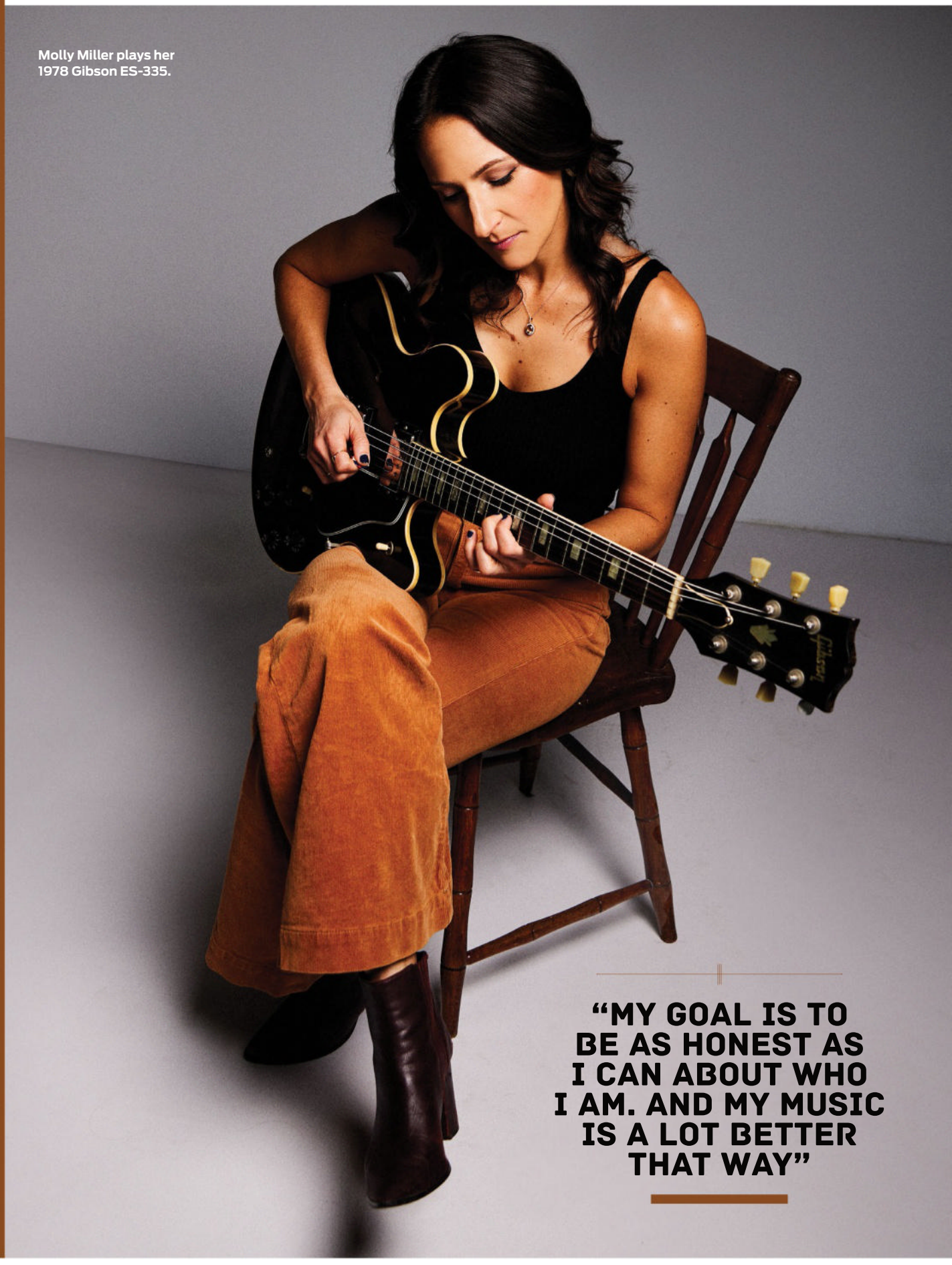
Then some of the songs are written by Jen and I together. It's pretty much split; half the record's just my songs and half of it is Jen and me. But it's funny that you say the "groove" thing. Jen and Jay are a couple, and Jen has probably 500 Jay Bellerose grooves on her computer. She'll put on a Jay groove and start writing and send me a section, and I'll finish it. Then we all get into a room and make the song a real "song" — you know, the arrangement. Jay references Booker T. & the M.G.'s a lot, the sort of idea where they're not necessarily each doing a crazy amount, but every little aspect is so important — how each player is playing their part, and just slightly differently, maybe, from section to section. That's helping to tell a story. We figure out the climaxes and how we breathe together. The little nuances.

The intro to "66 West" has some fantastic interplay between you and Jay. It's free time but feels composed, and the entire song arrangement is very different.

That song was the most "Frankenstein-ed" together. Jen said to play something at the top, and I think I started doing this slow intro. Then Jay started playing, and it really became this interactive, dynamic, cinematic thing, where you see all this tension getting bigger. Then he suggested he start playing drums and I, out of time, allude to the melody, because we were thinking of these westerns where they'll have these themes that keep coming back. So throughout the song, we play the theme multiple different ways: over a four-bar phrase, over an eight-bar phrase, out of time, in 3/4 and then in 4/4. It feels like the opus of the record.

***Hotspur* is all original material, but last year you released *Wild World*, an EP of covers, and you often post videos of your trio performing cover songs. Did you take a different approach?**

I first just learn it and make sense of the harmony. It's kind of the same way I write a song: I think about what's the vibe, what's the point I'm trying to get through. "After Midnight" is just swanky and cool. I ask myself, What tools can I use in arranging to push the song forward and put my spin on it? Maybe a different harmony idea, or in [*Cat*



Molly Miller plays her 1978 Gibson ES-335.

"MY GOAL IS TO BE AS HONEST AS I CAN ABOUT WHO I AM. AND MY MUSIC IS A LOT BETTER THAT WAY"

Stevens'] "Wild World," for example, we have this open, psychedelic section because, well, it's a wild world, you know? [*laughs*]

You have a doctorate in music and know so much, yet still have a very natural, musical style. How do you cross the bridge from simply having knowledge to actually making music with it?

A couple of things. I'm really focused on melodies, and when I prep for a record, when I'm learning a song or practicing, I do record myself and listen back. And I'm not listening for cool scales; I'm listening for, Is there a clear melody? Is there a story being told or motifs that are being pushed? One of my favorite players is Grant Green; he's the one that got me into jazz. His playing is so conversational, and that's always something that I loved and that I strive for, when you feel like someone's talking to you. I want it to be conversational, where you're being told a story, essentially.

And I practice that way, too; I've spent enough time on my instrument where, sure, I know all the scales all over my guitar, and I can play all the modes of harmonic minor, melodic minor, whatever. I can do that, but I never want to make it sound like I'm practicing that stuff, because I don't like the way that sounds. I want it to be emotional. So I listen back and try to be honest with myself: not how fast am I playing, but am I coherently expressing myself to the best of my abilities? That is melody driven. Melody and storytelling: Those are the things I think about.

Even when I'm practicing scales, I'm not practicing, like, This is Dorian. Here's Phrygian Dominant. I'm not thinking about that; I'm thinking about how do these scales — and these sounds, more than scales — interact with each other, and how can I create melodies with them? What notes are shared, what tensions live between them, where if I go from one scale to the next, if I move up a half step, is that a cool way to connect them in a coherent melodic way, versus Let me shred this scale as fast as possible?

ERIC MORGENSEN

Are you listening for other specific things when you record yourself?

I try to play full songs so I can hear how I'm playing the melody, how I'm soloing, how I'm making the song breathe. It's more honest than anything else; it's like looking into a mirror. But when I listen back, it's not about bashing myself. I think that's something that's taken me time. It really is to discover the things that I find that I like, the things that I may be overdoing or that I should dig deeper into. I want to be playful and interactive in the way I play, whether I'm alone or with a band. I want to practice the way I'm going to perform.

When you're improvising, how do you turn off that critical part of your brain?

It's almost like that's why I play music, because you have to be hyper-present. When I practice and record myself and I'm listening back, I try to listen as if it's not myself. I think when you're listening to someone else, they're allowed to have mistakes. You may not even hear them as mistakes; they're just playing music. So I try to listen to myself in those terms. It's not like, I made this mistake, the whole thing's screwed! When I can let go of it, that allows me to be present.

You integrate hybrid picking into your playing along with single-note lines and strumming in a very seamless way. Is that something you think about?

It happens really naturally now. It started because I was taking lessons with Bruce Forman at USC, and I was doing this thing where I would comp with my fingers because of the warmth, and then grab my pick if I was going to solo. And he said, "Why are you two different people? You should have one voice." So I started trying to just keep my pick in my hand, doing solo chord-melody arrangements. I wanted to be able to have my pick for soloing or some single-note stuff, and yet still have the warmth of my fingers for things like comping. I studied a lot of fingerstyle — Elizabeth Cotten, Memphis Minnie, Chet Atkins. I also spent four years playing classical, and integrating the pick into it felt like it gave me so much more freedom than I could experience with just fingerstyle or just picking.

To touch on your playing with Jason Mraz, how does playing pop music affect your jazz playing, or vice versa?

I feel like it all informs each other. I find the more I do not compartmentalize and just let these things inform each other, the more true I can be to myself and my sound.

And I've noticed how it's been so much more fruitful, because my goal is to be as honest as I can about who I am, and my music is a lot better that way. My guitar playing is a lot better that way, and I think I'm a happier person when I'm not trying to sound like John Mayer or Wes Montgomery or George Benson. I'm me. And I get hired to be me then, instead of those awkward moments where they say, "Can you sound like XYZ?" Instead they say, "Can you sound like Molly Miller?" And I'm, like, "Yes!"

‘People expect me to stay rooted in the blues.

‘BUT I HAVE TO BE MY OWN ARTIST’

Once a preternatural blues phenom, **Quinn Sullivan** charts a broader musical path on *Salvation,* an album born out of loss and self-discovery.

BY ALAN PAUL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM ARBOGAST

AT AGE 25, Quinn Sullivan is already a music veteran. That's what happens when you begin your career before you're out of first grade. The singer/songwriter and guitarist has cemented his transition from child prodigy to mature adult performer with his new, fifth album, *Salvation* (Provogue/Mascot Label Group). The wide-ranging set touches a lot of musical bases, with riff-driven hard rockers reminiscent of classic radio rock, like "Dark Love," rubbing shoulders with R&B falsetto groovers, like "Once Upon a Lie."

"Musically, *Salvation* is truly where I'm at in my life, and it touches on topics of loss, trauma and love," Sullivan says. "It's a very personal album."

Sullivan became nationally known when he appeared on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* at age six. Two years later, he met Buddy Guy backstage at a concert near his New Bedford, Massachusetts, home, and the blues legend invited him out to play the night's last few songs. "That night truly changed my life, both professionally and personally," Sullivan says. His mentorship with Guy lasted a decade, as he often appeared with him and even recorded a solo on Guy's 2008 album, *Skin Deep*.

"I'm forever grateful for Buddy's support for my music," Sullivan says. "His mentorship lasted about 10 years, but we have a friendship that is eternal."

You started playing at age three and were on *Ellen DeGeneres* when you were six. How the heck did that happen?

My parents knew that I had a natural ear for music, which I was always around because of them. When I was three, I saw Dickey Betts at a blues festival in my hometown and was mesmerized. I had a First Act acoustic guitar that I brought everywhere, and a photographer snapped me strumming along. It ended up on the front of our local newspaper.

My father, Terry, had been almost jokingly emailing TV show producers with some videos of me playing around town. The *Ellen Show* producers got back to him almost immediately, and a month later my dad and I were flying to Los Angeles. I had never been on a plane before! Ellen was super kind and gave me a Gibson ES-335, which was double my size. I still have it today and got it signed by B.B. King and Buddy Guy. It's my own personal national treasure. The show aired about a week later and propelled me onto the scene nationally. People still come up to me and say they saw me on *Ellen*.

Tell me about how you met Buddy at a concert in New Bedford.

Some people we knew at the theater were aware that I wanted to meet Buddy, and they very graciously got us backstage for a meet and greet. Buddy was so kind and soft spoken. He had an American flag rugby shirt on, with a brown fedora, a gold Rolex with gold rings... He was the coolest person I had ever seen! He signed my Squier Stratocaster and asked me to play a few notes for him, then said, "Be ready when I call you."

Can you point to a few things you learned from him?

I learned so much musically from Buddy. The main thing was his showmanship — his way of commanding a crowd like no other. He can have the audience in the palm of his hand in less than a second, then go into a blistering solo that just knocks everyone out. I try to bring that fire into my live shows. Another valuable lesson I've learned from Buddy is to put 100 percent of your heart and soul into every performance, whether you're playing in front of 10

people or 10,000, because you never know who's watching. I sometimes have to remind myself of that when I'm gearing up to play for a room of 50 to 60 people. His voice echoes in my brain and helps immensely in those situations.

Was there a specific point where music transitioned from something that a parent pushed you toward to being your own thing?

I was lucky in that I was never pushed into anything by my parents, although they certainly lifted me up and allowed me to follow my dreams. I think exposing children to music at a young age has nothing but positive outcomes, but parents come up to me and ask for advice on how to get their child into playing an instrument and I always say never force him or her to do anything. It'll never be natural if they don't seek it out themselves.

I think it started becoming my own thing at around 11 or 12. I put out my first album at that age and was touring heavily, mostly in the summer and on school vacations. I knew that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, but I have had that feeling for as long as I can remember. Being an artist is something that I feel is a need for me as a human being. It's the best way I know how to express myself.

The new album covers a lot of ground, including R&B and rock. You do a great cover of the Beatles' "Dear Prudence." I love the arrangement, which adds a guitar coda that makes it very much yours.

Thank you! I wouldn't be a musician if it wasn't for the Beatles. They have by far had the biggest impact on me musically. I just love how they never let anyone define them. They changed with the times and pushed the boundaries in the studio and did things that hadn't been done before. I still find new things about songs I've listened to since I was three. Every time I'm in the studio, I think about how they would approach things.

Who are some of your other primary guitar and musical influences?

There are so many guitar influences, but if I had to narrow it down to a few, I'd say Eric Clapton, Derek Trucks, Carlos Santana and David Gilmour. They shaped guitar playing for me, and they all have one thing in common: They play from their heart to make every note count. I am a fan of guitarists who tell a story with their playing that can move you emotionally. All of them do that for me, and I listen to them every day. I've been lucky enough to meet, hang and play with all of them, except Gilmour, who's still on my bucket list. I'm also influenced by modern music, like Tame Impala and Post Malone, and even Harry Styles. I'm a big fan of their albums and am influenced by their songwriting.

Recently, I've been getting into Middle Eastern, African and Indian music, via Derek Trucks. I've heard him talk about how much those styles have influenced his approach to playing the guitar, so I've been digging into some of the people he's mentioned, like Ali Akbar Khan, D'Gary and Bismillah Khan. It's such beautiful music. I'm also a fan of soul singers like Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, Otis Redding, Sly Stone and, of course, Susan Tedeschi, who is the best singer I've ever witnessed live. My influences keep evolving and changing. I'm always keeping my ear open for new music and discovering new artists every day that I add to my arsenal of inspiration.

***Salvation* feels like a very emotional album. Tell me about the recording process.**

Thanks. This was a very therapeutic album to make. It touches on loss, trauma and love. I lost my mother unexpectedly a year and a half ago, so this album was made while grieving this unimaginable loss. I felt her strength pushing me through. I probably wouldn't have been able to make an album at that time if it wasn't for the strength of my mother carrying me through the entire process. I called the album *Salvation* because that word echoes what I'm going through right now: being saved by the love and the people around you, through the pain of loss and the trauma that comes along with that. That feeling speaks in all of the songs, touching on several topics.

I recorded it in Minneapolis with producer/mixer John Fields and wrote the album with John and songwriter Kevin Bowe. My live band is on two tracks, but we used session musicians for most of the album. I'm the only guitar player and played bass on some of the tracks too, which is a first for me.

What gear did you use?

The electrics were Fender Stratocasters and Telecasters, Gibson Les Pauls and

SGs, and a PRS Silver Sky. My acoustic was a Martin Eric Clapton signature 00-28. For amps, I used a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a Vibrolux Reverb. The pedals were a Vemuram Jan Ray [*boost overdrive*] and Myriad Fuzz, an Ibanez Tube Screamer, a Fulltone Octafuzz, and Strymon Lex and Flint pedals.

Tell me about a few of the songs on the album, starting with "Don't Wanna Die Today," which has a great guitar tone, and two others that are special to you.

I was inspired by the *Jesus Christ Superstar* soundtrack, and the groove to "Don't Wanna Die Today" began with that album in mind. I was also going for that *Wheels of Fire* Cream sound with my guitar. I played a Gibson SG '61 reissue. I wanted it to sound like the '60s, and I have to give credit to John for capturing that sound.

"Once Upon a Lie" is one of my personal favorites. The inspiration came from the school of soul music. I had the initial riff for years but never really touched it until I was in the studio and found the old voice memo on my phone. I've always loved singing in falsetto, and this song just felt like the right song to do it. Lyrically, it's about the feeling of being lied to by someone you love, which is about the worst feeling. It's about being tired of being lied to and moving on with your life.

> **"I NEVER WANT TO BE DEFINED BY ONE GENRE BECAUSE I NEVER WANT TO HAVE A LID ON MY CREATIVITY"**

The third song I'll mention is "Salvation." I wanted a song that paid homage to Jimi Hendrix, with some of that fire, but without copying Hendrix, because let's face it, nobody can do what Jimi did. Michael Bland plays on it, and he's one of the greatest drummers alive. He played with Prince for a long time, so he put his vibe on the track, which I think really lifts it. I'm excited for people to hear "Salvation" and take on their own meanings to the songs.

Is it fair to say that you started as a blues guy and keep expanding while staying rooted there?

You know, I haven't ever felt like a blues guy, despite being rooted in it and having a mentor who is the genre's biggest star. I have a major love for blues, which I think is the purest music ever, but it's not necessarily the genre I gravitate toward when working on my own music. I'm influenced by everything: soul, rock, Latin, Indian, hip-hop rhythms and some pop. I'm a singer/songwriter and guitar player who draws inspiration from a lot of styles and mixes them all into my music, which leans toward rock and soul. I never want to be defined by one genre because I never want to have a lid on my creativity.

A lot of people have looked at me as some sort of "savior of the blues." That's certainly not a one-person job, and we have to look more at how we can keep that music alive in a way that speaks to young people. We have to push it forward but not be stuck in the past. There's a lot of people who expect players like me to stay rooted in one area, because of their own nostalgia. But I have to be my own artist, and that's the place I'm moving toward now in my career.

Tripliciti make a stand. (from left) Andy McKee, Calum Graham and Trevor Gordon Hall.

TRIPLE VISION

What happens when three acclaimed fingerstylists join their superpowers? **Andy McKee**, **Calum Graham** and **Trevor Gordon Hall** reveal the answer with **Tripliciti**, their new trio and self-titled textural album.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAT JOHNSON

PUTTING MULTIPLE PERCUSSIVE fingerstylists in the same trio could be a three-ring disaster, but not when the ringmaster is the modern master and the others are accomplished disciples eager to serve the greater good. That's the recipe for Tripliciti, and their self-titled debut is layered with lovely interlocking parts laced with lush ambiance. It's the ensemble guitar album of the year, and it could represent a watershed acoustic moment, with a tour and more music still to come.

Andy McKee is the headman, a player who, in a lot of ways, is like the acoustic Joe Satriani of this millennium. He's arguably the most influential player of the era, certainly on solo acoustic and perhaps overall. And, as it turns out, McKee even has a Satch-like flair on the electric, something that's highlighted on *Tripliciti*. His playing aside, McKee is eager to educate others on his groundbreaking techniques in forums like his immersive Musicarium camp, and to share the stage with virtuosos on tour when he's not going it alone.

In addition, McKee spearheads the Guitar Masters tour that regularly features three gurus, like an acoustic version of Satch's G3. The 2019 lineup included fellow modern fingerstyle monsters Calum Graham and Trevor Gordon Hall, who are now united with McKee in Tripliciti.

It's safe to say, Tripliciti defies expectations. Sure, they slap and tap their acoustics, but not in the overt fashion that made two-hand percussive fingerstyle so omnipresent with the advent of YouTube and the CandyRat label. The trio have their fireworks, but it's nothing like the bluegrass-style ripping that's come to dominate the virtuoso acoustic guitar playing of, say, Billy Strings and Molly Tuttle.

Instead, Tripliciti is about textural tapestries. Each of the three guitarists takes turns leading on original tunes from their solo repertoire while the other two find complementary parts, often on high- or low-pitched guitars, creating tri-toned sonics almost like a super guitar with extra strings played by a 30-fingered alien. Then there are extra goodies, such as EBow, slide, electric guitar and ambient effects that take the affair to otherworldly destinations.

Guitar legends of all stripes are already raving about Tripliciti. Tommy Emmanuel describes the group as "Relaxed, yet intense and worldly. Brave yet simple." John Petrucci calls them, "just phenomenal," while Steve Lukather sums the trio up as the "best thing my ears have heard in a long time!"

So what do McKee, Graham and Hall have to say about all this? *Guitar Player* caught up with them to find out.

What's the origin of Tripliciti?

ANDY McKEE We all met at a festival in Pennsylvania years ago and became fast friends as we share a similar sense of humor and an appreciation for the depth of fingerstyle guitar playing. We all love the craft of creating music that is relatable and non-vocal in nature.

TREVOR GORDON HALL It was summer of 2012. I knew Calum from competing at the Canadian Guitar Festival and Fingerstyle Competition, and we were both huge fans of Andy. The festival in Philadelphia got rained out, so we went out to grab food and quickly became friends. We toured together in 2019 for a string of Guitar Masters dates. It's a cool tour that was started by Andy and Eric Johnson and has been all over the world. The format is three players; each plays a solo set, and then collaboration. Each person would bring an original for the others to add parts, and that's what we did here as well. Chemistry sparked, and as we kept adding more songs the realization came that it was time to make a record together.

CALUM GRAHAM There is a very natural synergy with our friendship, philosophy and mindset. Since the personal nature of the acoustic guitar lends itself to being more of a solo endeavor, we thought it would be unique to try something different with the three of us collaborating and orchestrating music

on various types of guitars.

What was the vision going into the studio?
McKEE We all wanted to capture something that let each of us express ourselves as individuals, yet maintain an illusion of being almost one instrument. There are times when the recordings almost sound like one giant guitar consisting of a baritone, a high-strung guitar and a standard-pitch guitar, all at once.
HALL I remember feeling this would be an extremely ambitious task to track in a way that doesn't get muddy or cluttered. It always worked like magic live onstage, but putting that on record was going to require some real expertise. I spent considerable time leading up to the sessions talking with our Grammy-winning audio genius, Corin Nelsen, about how to prepare for the recording process.

Some pieces, like Andy's "Hunter's Moon," already have him doing a lot of epic multitasking, and circumstances like that forced us into many fun situations finding how to support the piece without getting in the way. Fingerstyle is mostly known to be a solo tradition, but it was fun to expand the possibilities by making a huge collective sound, as well as exploring how delicate and intimate we could be together.

McKee poses with his signature model Greenfield acoustic.

How did the sessions go down?
McKEE We were in a cool studio in a refurbished barn in Connecticut. The original composer would lay down the tune, and then the others would record accompaniments individually. Most parts were worked out ahead of time, but we came up with a few in the studio.
GRAHAM We tracked everything over the span of a week at Maple Hill Farms. Just being in that space was inspirational. Corin converted that old horse barn into a studio, so he truly knew how to get the best sound there.
HALL I had recorded in the barn with Corin a few years prior and fell in love with the place. I did some production behind the desk along with Corin, as I love being involved in both sides of the process. Every song was its own world to explore. We laughed a lot as it came together, and we listened through mixes with an occasional tear or two.

Are there certain strengths that each player brings?
McKEE Trevor is great at writing melody. He uses a term called "chasing the chills," trying to create stuff with real feeling and emotion. Calum is like the John Paul Jones of the group. He comes up with so many cool parts and using different instruments and tools like the EBow.
HALL Not noodling is a unified strength. Sometimes we do noodle around to find parts, but we all naturally settle for ideas that enhance the piece rather than jumping in to steal the spotlight with technical gymnastics. The fact that each

player is well represented on the record is because of our unified desire to make the whole sound complete. I was amazed yet again at Andy's timing, which was so strong and clear to hear because we never used a click track. Calum's sense of space and knowing exactly what and when to play was another reminder of why he is such a tasteful, melodic player. His EBow parts put us all into moments of trance. I enjoyed finding spaces to enhance the harmony of a chord or accent a melody, or even drive the percussion parts louder for more power.

GRAHAM It was refreshing to be able to orchestrate these songs with multiple voices on multiple instruments. The overall result is unlike anything I have ever heard from a guitar trio. I played a nylon-string guitar on "Journey of Love," and I used the EBow to add ambient, ethereal textures where Andy's and Trevor's parts felt full. The biggest thing I learned in working on this album was to listen deeply to what is happening and know when to do what: harmonize, add a new part, create a texture, and when to not play. It's all about recognizing the many musical moments that happen in a composition and trying to be mindful in making decisions about contributions that best serve the song.

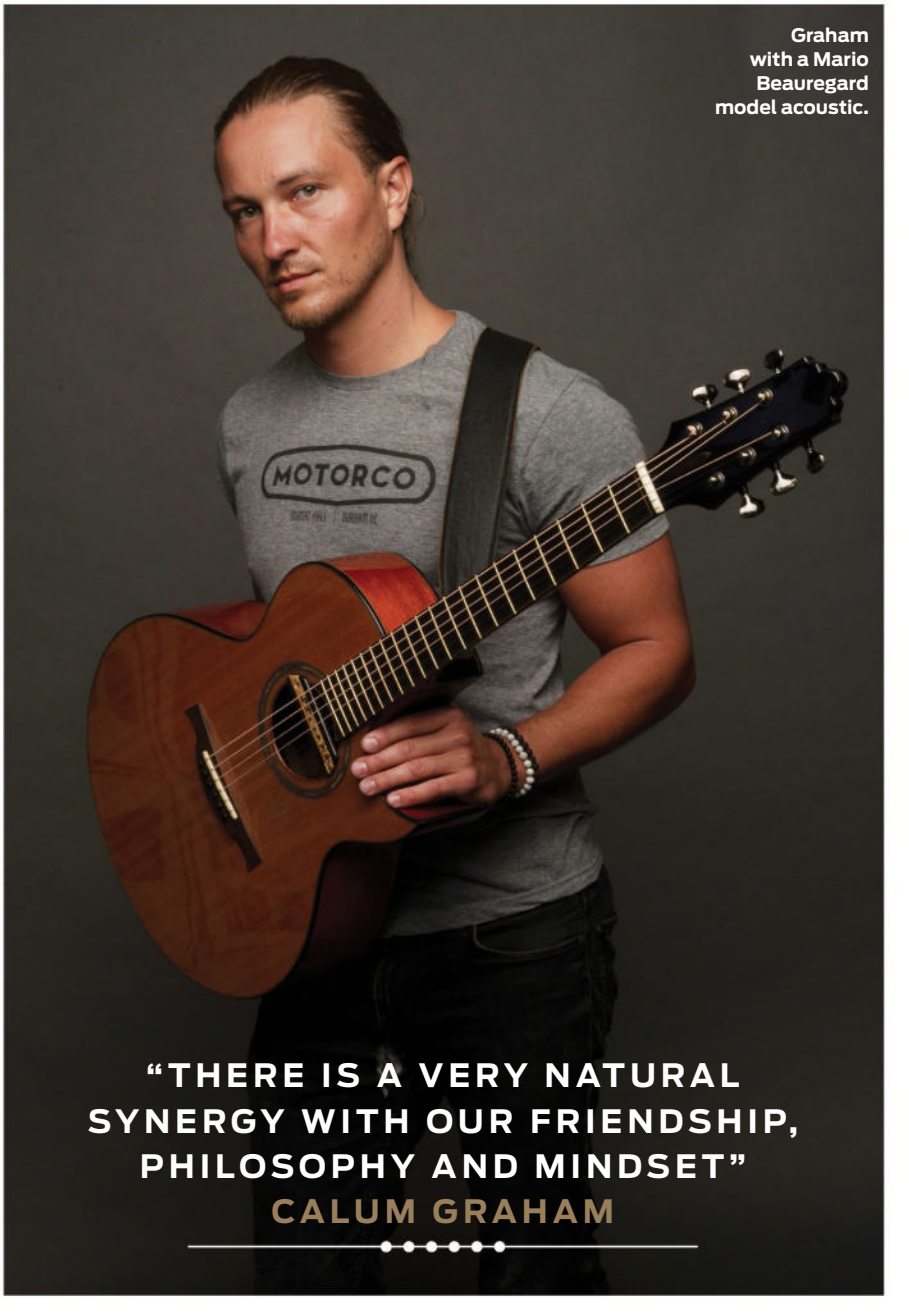
Most people don't know that Andy can also tear it up on the electric guitar. It was great to have him featured on two of the tracks with incredible melodic solos to expand the sonic palette of the album along with Trevor's Kalimbatar and high-strung guitar, which added some gorgeous colors.

What are your primary instruments on *Tripliciti*?

McKEE I played my signature model Greenfield and a baritone made by Canadian luthier Michael Greenfield as well. My electric is an Ernie Ball Music Man John Petrucci Signature Majesty six-string, which I used on "In Lak Ech" and "That Old Familiar Pain."

HALL I mostly used my main guitar, which is a Kalimbatar built by Canadian luthier Sheldon Schwartz. It's a steel-string equipped with a custom kalimba finger piano that can attach or detach whenever needed. I also used a high-pitched guitar made by Pennsylvania luthier Mike Haney, and that was a lot of fun to add to the mixes. It is featured on "The Blue Hour" and "Memento Vivere." I adore the sound of the high-pitched guitar combined with a standard steel-string plus a baritone, because it's like a massive 18-string guitar with the sound expanded both higher and lower.

GRAHAM I played a mahogany/cedar small jumbo acoustic steel-string guitar as well as a rosewood/spruce baritone built by [*Canadian luthier*] Mario Beauregard. On "Journey of Love" I played three EBow parts: One on my steel-string, another on Trevor's Furch nylon-string guitar, and another on Andy's electric. The combination of all our instruments expands the tonal



Graham with a Mario Beauregard model acoustic.

"THERE IS A VERY NATURAL SYNERGY WITH OUR FRIENDSHIP, PHILOSOPHY AND MINDSET"
CALUM GRAHAM

palette, giving each composition a unique texture.

Can you provide some insights on the first single, "In Lak Ech"?

GRAHAM I wrote this song for my dear friend Danny Choi when he lost his father. The parts that Andy and Trevor added are sublime. I love how Trevor chose to use the slide throughout this piece. It adds so much and is an unexpectedly beautiful sonic addition to the album. Andy's solo at the end is so melodic, tasteful and killer!

McKEE The way Calum is strumming about two-thirds of the way into the song brings the energy level up, and I felt like it needed an electric guitar solo there. That's the way I was hearing it in my head.

HALL Andy's electric lead guitar adds an extra level of excitement because he absolutely nails it! I contributed slide guitar to achieve a weeping vocal quality, along with kalimba and my standard steel-string guitar. During the album's post-production, we spent time experimenting with different reverbs to capture the essence of this piece. It holds a great deal of emotional weight.

Hall's Kalimbatar is a steel-string equipped with a custom kalimba finger piano.

"AS WE KEPT ADDING MORE SONGS, THE REALIZATION CAME THAT IT WAS TIME TO MAKE A RECORD TOGETHER"
TREVOR GORDON HALL

How did you all approach "For My Father"?

McKEE My dad gave me my first guitar when I was 13 years old. He passed away in 2005 from cancer, but I was able to perform this piece for him before he died. I didn't change anything about the arrangement or my part for this version. I used the signature Greenfield, tuned, from low to high, E C D G A D. There's a capo on the third fret. I've played it as a duo with Calum and Trevor individually, and they both came up with great parts. Incredibly, the three parts blended as a trio. The trio version is so powerful, it's almost difficult to get through without feeling overwhelmed.

HALL This piece has always held a special place in my heart. It has become a staple in the standard fingerstyle guitar repertoire, and its meticulous attention to detail make it a perfect composition. It was the very first composition we played together as a trio, and I believe it truly solidified the uniqueness of our chemistry as a group.

GRAHAM Every song on the album is special, but every time we play "For My Father," it feels like something sacred.

How did another popular McKee tune, "Hunter's Moon," get the Tripliciti treatment?

McKEE The arrangement is the same as my solo version on *Joyland* [*2010*]. Some fingerstyle pieces are mellow and chill, and I wanted to write one that wasn't. I wanted higher energy, more inspired by Pantera than Pat Metheny, I guess. The tuning is [*low to high*] C G D F B♭ D. Dynamically speaking, we wanted an ebb and flow, so we bring down the energy a bit when the third A section comes around, and then we explode on the fourth time through.

GRAHAM I play baritone guitar in standard tuning. Their two acoustic parts already sounded quite full, so I decided the EBow would make a nice addition in the verses to have a call-and-response part with Andy's melody. In the bridge where Andy and Trevor are both strumming, I felt like a solo would be the right fit. I'm usually too shy to do a guitar solo, but in the spirit of Larry the Enticer I thought, I'm just gonna send it! [*laughs*]

HALL When we perform "Hunter's Moon" live, it feels like a full-on rock-band experience. There are multiple layers of instrumentation, all working together to support Andy's vision and the overall arc of the song. This piece packs a powerful kick, which is a direction I am eager to explore further. I particularly appreciate the contrast between "For My Father" and "Hunter's Moon," as it showcases the dynamic range we enjoy exploring as a group.

How about the lovely textures that make up "The Blue Hour"?

HALL I originally wrote this piece after playing a unique guitar that was made for Sting [*Mike Haney high-strung 12-fret 00*]. It had high-pitched strings, and as I played a few chords, something sparked. Basically, it's like buying a 12-string guitar pack and only putting the octave strings on.

McKEE I'm mostly playing harmony along with Trevor on my signature Greenfield in standard tuning.

GRAHAM I'm playing the baritone on this one in standard tuning with a capo on the first fret. I thought adding a harmony part to Trevor's melody would work well in this piece.

HALL I was so excited to hear how fresh this sounded. A trio of guitars, all in drastically different pitches — I had not heard anything like it before. It was very dear to my heart as a solo piece, but now, after hearing it with the guys, it's impossible to play it solo anymore. I keep looking around for the other parts the guys bring and start to really miss them! This piece feels like the true essence of our group sound, and I can't wait to explore more.

How did the lone new composition, "Memento Vivere," come together?

HALL As we first embarked on our collaboration, I began to contemplate our sound and the possibilities of exploring new compositional territories. I composed this piece on the high-strung guitar, envisioning how Andy and Calum would complement and expand upon it, and they absolutely nailed it.

GRAHAM I'm playing the baritone guitar in standard tuning to counter Trevor's high-strung part. I thought it would give his part some weight to fill in the low end and to also create a moving, complementary voice in that range. I love how this song evolved and blossomed into being three-dimensional.

McKEE It has a way of enchanting you. It's more like a spell than a piece of music. I am playing the standard pitch guitar, and I play the lead guitar solo. I wanted it to feel more like a vocal melody, not too fast or flashy.

HALL This marks a bold step into the new path of writing original songs for Tripliciti. We are currently writing the next record with all new material, but first we thought it would be fun to return to the Guitar Masters tour and present a record to everyone based on our previous tour experiences.

So you're already working on new material and preparing a tour?

McKEE Yes. We take baritones, high-strung guitars, standard acoustic and electric guitars whenever we do a show. You get everything that's on the record. I always thought that playing acoustic guitar without a pick was going to be only me on the stage, but it's been fun to play with two like-minded fingerstyle guitar players. I feel like this album is full of rich, beautiful stories without a single word being spoken.

FROM MICHIGAN TO MÖTLEY CRÜE

A masterclass with John 5 on the virtues of musical diversity, consistency and dedication to your art.

BY CHRIS BUONO

GROWING UP ON a midwestern lake, under the wings of a loving family that would watch episodes of *Hee Haw*, a young John Lowery found the guitar at a tender age. With equal parts innate talent and boundless curiosity, combined with a traditional pioneer's work ethic, the inspired adolescent set a goal to play the guitar and play it well, whether it be rock, metal, blues or country. John was on a mission.

While he was still a teenager, John's ethos, coupled with his laser-focused vision, led him to leave his beloved childhood home in Michigan for Los Angeles. It was in the City of Angels that he would eventually become the world-renowned guitar slinger known as John 5. The path to that moniker, not to mention J5's entire career, was born on a boast to budget-conscious record producers that he could "do their session in half the time and for half the price" required by other guitarists. Of the many attributes required to pull off such a feat in L.A.'s infamously competitive environment, versatility was paramount. Fortunately, John had it in spades.

Even so, competence and consistency are the golden tickets to entering and thriving in that world. After a few impressive and successful freelance recording sessions, word of John's musical and technical competence spread quickly, and so did his connections with artists as far and wide as Lita Ford, k.d. lang and Meat Loaf. Before long, John landed gigs with Rob Halford, David Lee Roth, Marilyn Manson and Rob Zombie. Today, as a full-time member of the venerable glam-metal outfit Mötley Crüe, John 5 has ascended through the ranks of top-gun electric guitar slingers thanks to his own almost freakish consistency, which is a direct result of his relentless commitment to playing guitar, in his words, "all the time."

John 5's distinguished playing and stage presence have made him one of today's most identifiable guitarists, one who earned his place on the Mount

JEN ROSENSTEIN

MORE ONLINE!

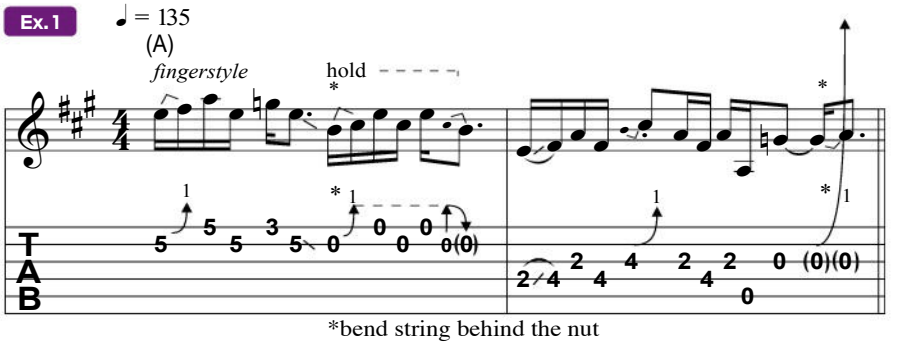
For video of this lesson, go to **guitarplayer.com/july24-lesson**

Olympus of journeymen band-member gigs, while developing a high profile as a prolific solo artist. In this lesson, the man of many hats, face paints and Teles guides us through a gaggle of curated techniques culled from his catalog of solo albums. Armed with his own signature Fender Ghost Telecaster plugged straight into a chain of his requested "stock gear that is nothing special," John 5 aims to help you develop your own consistency by giving you some fun stuff to play just as he does: all the time.

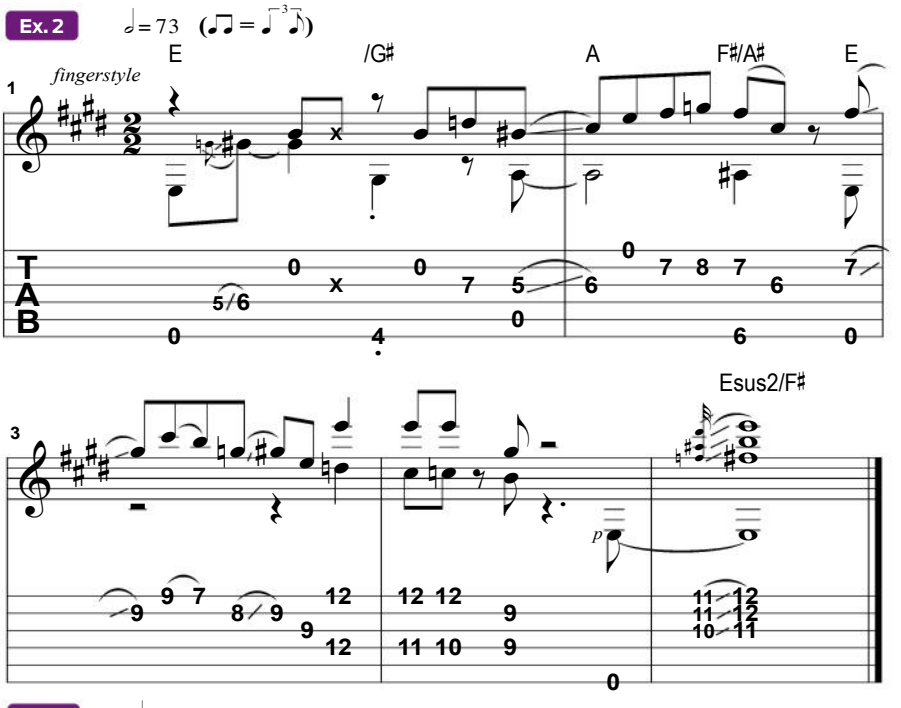
Typically, guitarists who wield a Tele exclusively embrace the country-oriented stylistic expectations that come with the axe. In this regard, John put in the time where it counts and packed his eclectic playing style and vocabulary with lots of fun and exciting country guitar techniques, such as chicken pickin', behind-the-nut bends, moving bass lines and rapid-fire banjo rolls, all while delivering the snap and feisty attack you'd expect. Bolstering the fun factor in John's playing is the fact that these idiomatic elements are thrown down at the drop of a hat by a leather-clad Kiss fanatic with gothic bug-eye sunglasses who happens to be in the world's most celebrated glam-metal band.

Ex. 1 puts John's approach to chicken pickin' and bending behind the nut front and center. He performs this phrase fingerstyle and navigates the nearly exclusive adjacent-string action with his pick-hand's thumb (*p*) and first finger (*i*), assigned to the lower and higher strings in each pairing, while adding the requisite accent and note length articulations. The cruxes of the lick, however, are the whole-step bends applied to the open B and G strings, for which he pushes down on them behind the nut at each juncture with his fret hand's 2nd and 3rd fingers. Behind-the-nut bends are ideally suited to a Tele, given the extended space between the strings and tuners. Taking a close look at John's signature Tele reveals a string tree for the highest two strings, placed unconventionally far away from the nut. While this helps facilitate the technique, John removes the tree on his personal

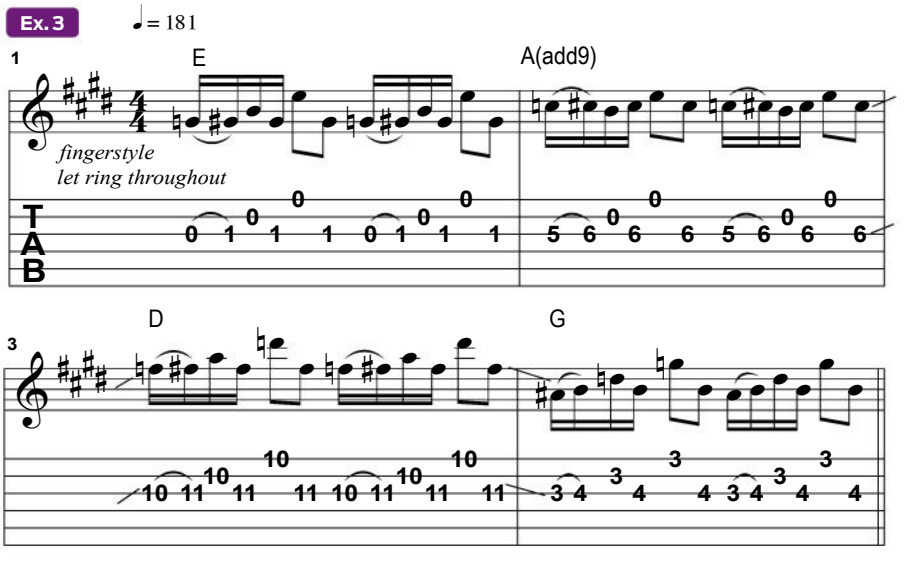
Ex. 1



Ex. 2

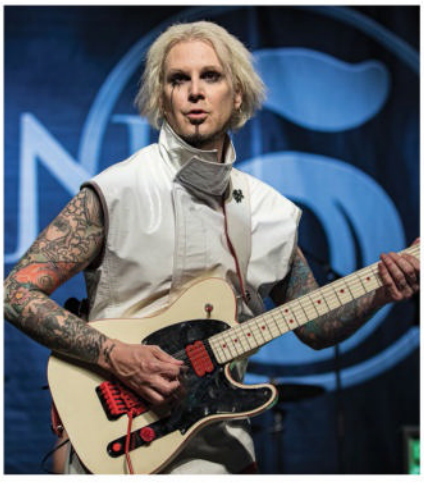


Ex. 3



guitar altogether for even easier execution of this technique.

Continuing to make exclusive use of his pick-hand thumb and first finger, John shows off his moving bass-line skills with **Ex. 2**, his homage to country

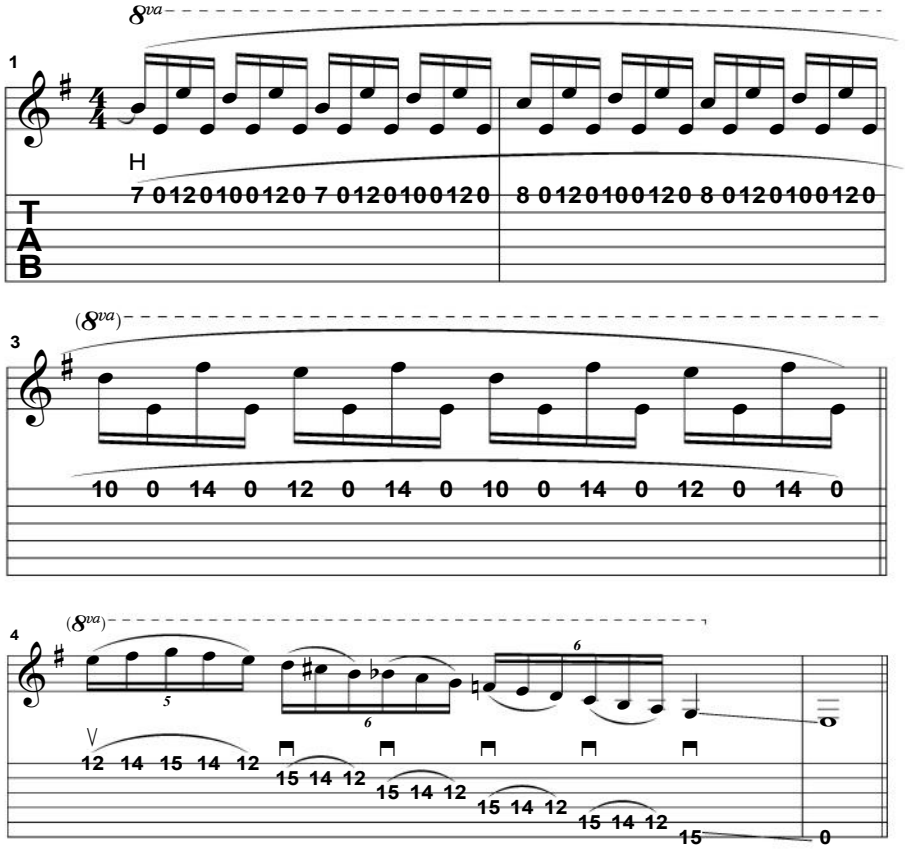


guitar legend Jerry Reed's classic guitar instrumental "Jiffy Jam," a tune John recorded for his 2014 release, *Careful With That Axe*. He assigns his thumb to the down-stemmed bass notes while his first finger takes care of the rest, including a slick upward swipe of the Esus2/F♯ at the end of the phrase. As a result of John's attentive fret-hand finger arching, the open strings clearly ring here while the fretted notes attacked with his pick-hand first finger are both slightly chopped in duration and accented alongside the more legato-sounding bass movement, resulting in a multifaceted performance.

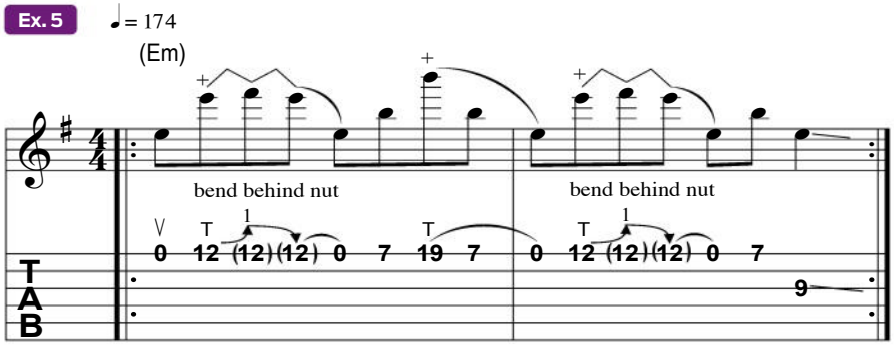
Adding his 2nd finger to the fingerpicking mix, John cracks the whip with **Ex. 3**, a burning four-bar run from his tune "Howdy" (from 2019's *Invasion*). Assigning his thumb to the G string and his first and second fingers to the B and high E strings, respectively, the guitarist blazes through a consistent disjunct banjo-roll pattern that traverses major tonalities in E, A, D and G, in 1st, 5th, 10th and 3rd positions, respectively.

At this point in the lesson, John unleashes the power of his Ghost Tele's DiMarzio D Activator pickups by switching to the hi-gain channel of the

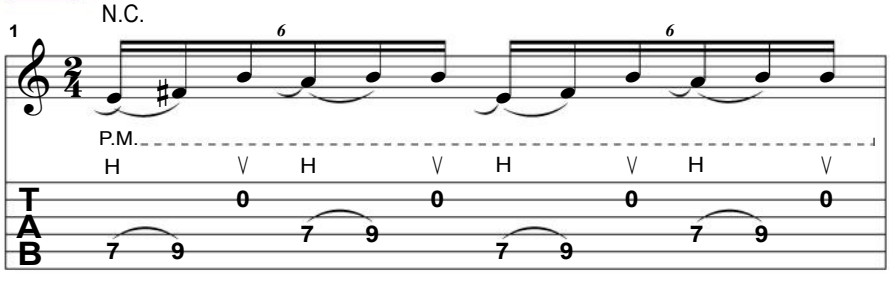
Ex. 4 ♩ = 140 (Em)



Ex. 5 ♩ = 174 (Em)

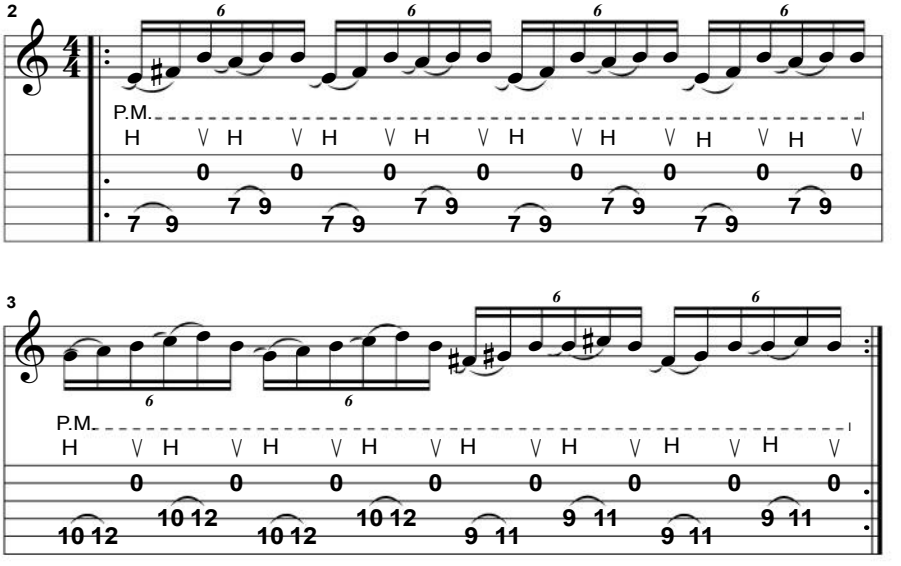


Ex. 6 ♩ = 120 N.C.



DANIEL KNIGHTON/GETTY IMAGES

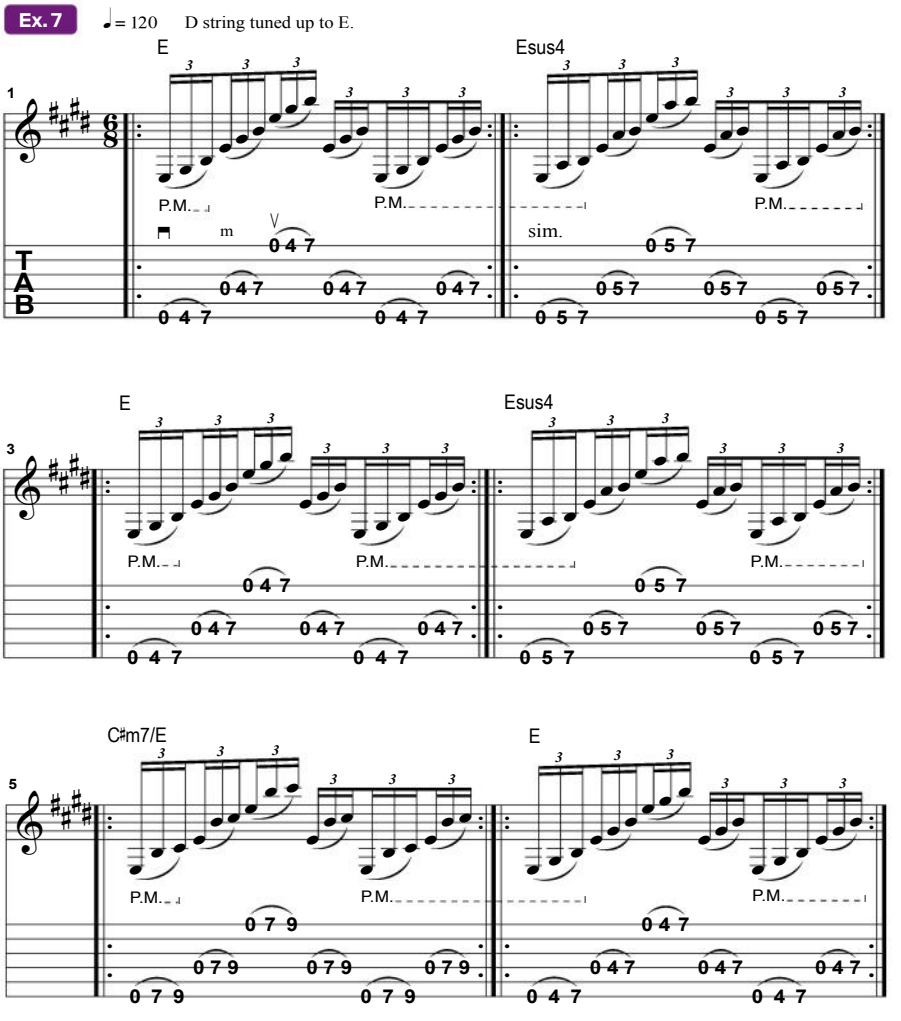
Marshall JVM half-stack that he's plugged into, additionally slamming the front end of the amp with a Boss SD-1 Super Overdrive pedal. He proceeds to dive into his vat of shred techniques with a bevy of legato licks that retain the presence of open strings, starting with a lick from "Creepshow," from 2021's *Sinner*, as shown in **Ex. 4**. Using only his high E string in bars 1 and 2, and no pick attacks, he hammers on and pulls off a sequence of notes from the E Aeolian mode (E, F♯, G, A, B, C, D), separated by the open string, which serves as a pedal tone. He follows this in bar 3 with a descending legato run that moves across all six strings in a visually symmetrical and musically insurgent half-step/whole-step fretboard pattern that's not beholden to any one scale, an approach popularized by Eddie Van Halen.



"YOU JUST DO IT, AND DO IT ALL THE TIME. THAT'S HOW I LOOK AT THE GUITAR."

Offering us another selection from *Sinner*, John remains on his high E string for **Ex. 5**, a playfully angular lick from "Euphoria." Notice how the line ricochets back and forth from the open string to notes tapped at the 12th and 19th frets and a 7th-fret B, fingered with the fret hand. Not leaving his affinity for slick country playing behind when things get gainy, the crafty guitarist again reaches behind the nut and proceeds to bend each tapped 12th-fret E note up a whole step, to F♯. No wonder he claims that this is "one of the most challenging things I do." That may be hard to believe when you see what's next.

Once more taking advantage of an open string, this time his B, John shifts into a more modern gear for **Ex. 6**, a passage from his recently recorded track "The Ghost." Using a technique reminiscent of the playing of Tosin Abasi and Roopam Garg, John pedals an open B note, which he picks repeatedly with an upstroke and quickly alternates with



double hammer-ons on the A and D strings, all while palm muting. Notice that the first fretted note on each string is articulated with a fret-hand tap, or "hammer-on from nowhere," indicated by an "H" in the tablature.

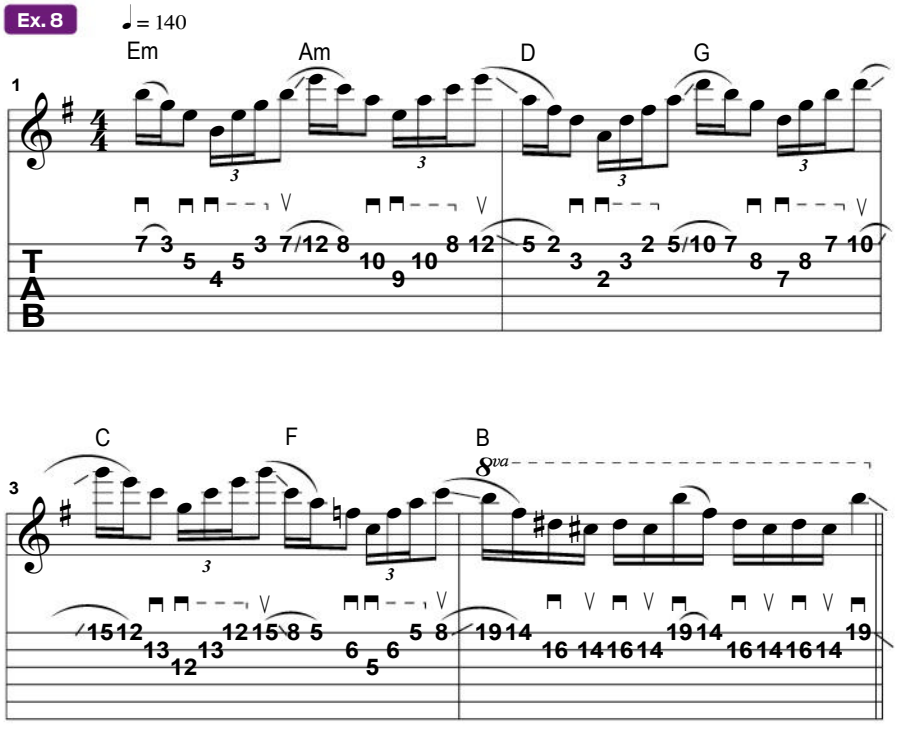
John extends his use of open strings and legato phrasing with **Ex. 7**, an acrobatic arpeggio-based string-skipping run he plays in "Welcome to the Island" (from *Sinner*), which outlines the arpeggios E (E, G♯, B), Esus4 (E, A, B) and C♯m7/E (E, B, C♯). Note that he tunes his D string up a whole step here, to E, to attain three open E notes. He then proceeds to cleanly jump between the 6th, 4th and 1st strings with double hammer-ons from each open string.

John switches techniques while continuing to burn up the Ghost's white-painted fretboard with some more licks from *Sinner*, first with a return to "Creepshow." He hits the clutch and shifts into a roller-coaster sweep-picking run (**Ex. 8**) that, again, will whip your head back and forth. Making use of 2nd-inversion minor (5, 1, ♭3) and major (5, 1, 3) triad arpeggios on the top three strings, John flows through a progression in the key of E minor. He aptly demonstrates the need for intent and precision when sweep picking as he slices across the strings with the required uninterrupted downstroke, albeit with his professed "light touch."

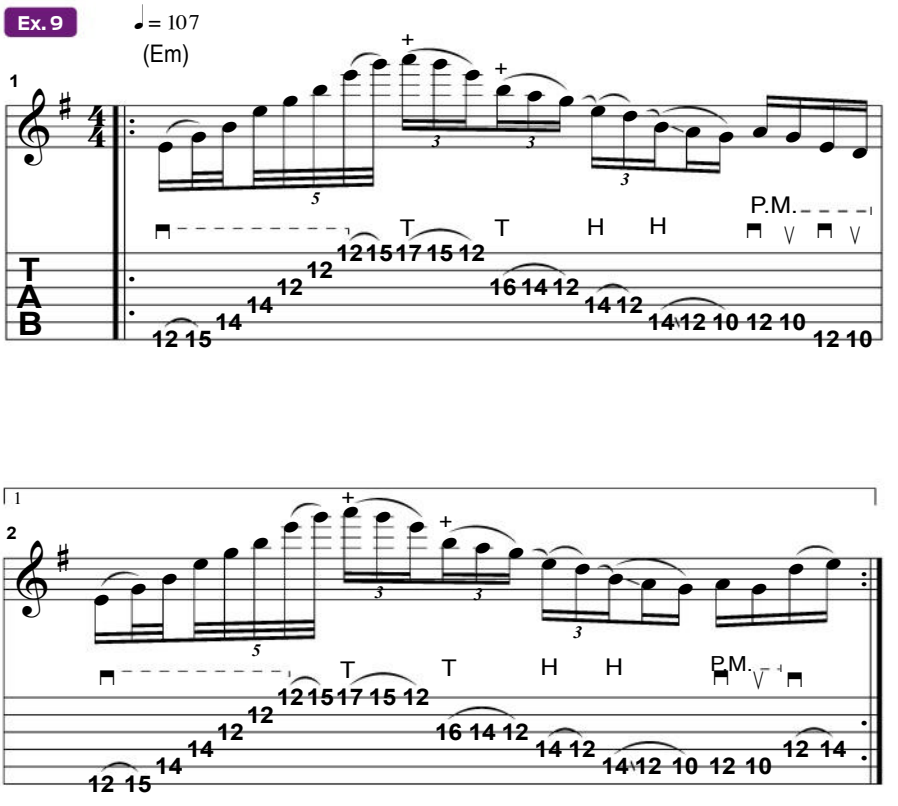
Ex. 9 grooves hard with a lick from "Que Pasa." This canto pushes the envelope with full six-string sweeps of an Em arpeggio (E, G, B) bookended by minor 3rd hammer-ons from E to G. The apex of the run is a tapped 17th fret high A note that kicks off an avalanche of descending legato double and single pull-offs and finger slides.

Pulling out yet another technique from his trick bag, John puts down his pick, rolls back the gain and proceeds to deconstruct the slap-guitar antics featured on his 2019 single "Zoinks!" **Ex. 10** lays some groundwork as John's thumb assumes a slapping motion (indicated by an *S*) on the 6th and 5th strings with intermittent double hammers-ons from — you guessed it — an open string, this time the low E.

Ex. 8



Ex. 9



The solitary high E-string notes are attacked by his pick-hand first finger in what's called a "pop."

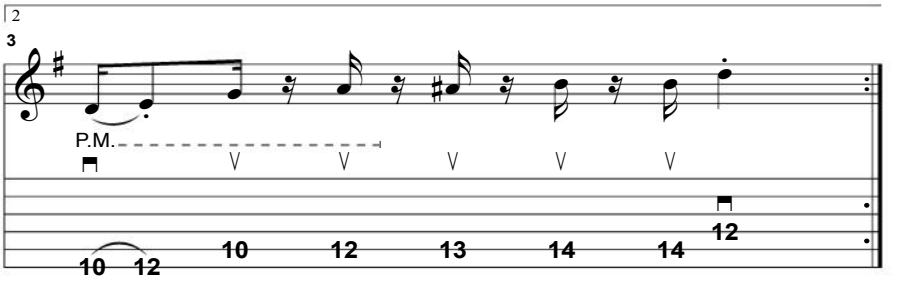
If the nod to Eddie Van Halen wasn't apparent back in Ex. 4, it's sure to come clear in **Ex. 11**, where John takes a walk down Mean Street with this additional four-bar phrase. Expanding upon the techniques demonstrated earlier, he adds sliding octaves and the Edward-approved tapped perfect-4ths dyads on the D and G strings (tapped together, as a double-stop, with the pad, or "paw," of his fret-hand index finger) before reminding us this is his show as he eerily scrapes his thumbnail down his low E string

toward the bridge pickup. Considering the myriad jarring audio and visual images John has unleashed over his lauded career, this is par for the course.

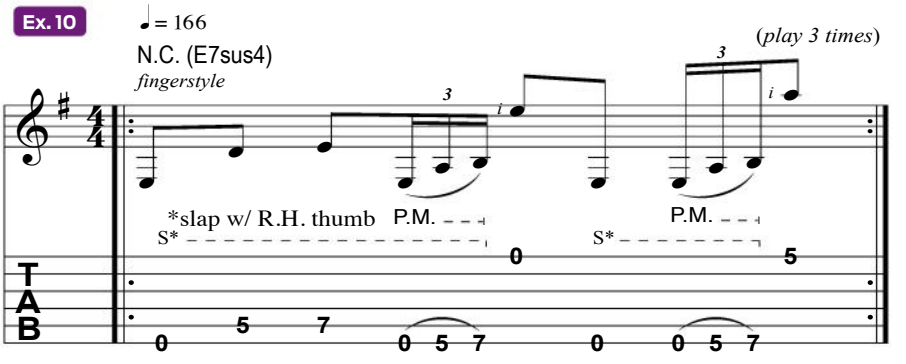
Whether he's performing on the world's biggest stages or at home on a couch surrounded by his four-legged hairless companions and creating Instagram videos for nearly three-quarters of a million followers, John 5 is consistent. Put a guitar in his hands and be sure to have your finger on the record button, because he's always at the ready… and, as many record producers will attest, he needs only one take!

When asked for advice on how to achieve this level of consistency and competence, John simply offers, "It's all in your mind and how you look at things. You just do it, and do it all the time. That's how I look at the guitar. I just play guitar all the time, like breathing or walking."

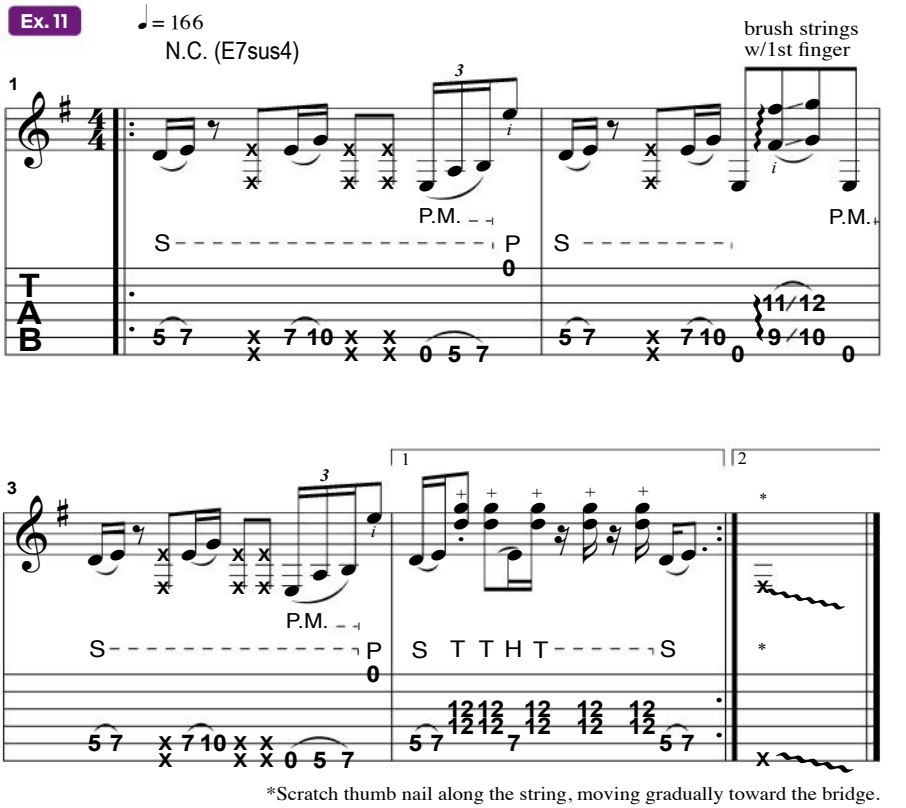
PAUL ARCHULETA/FILMMAGIC



Ex. 10



Ex. 11



*Scratch thumb nail along the string, moving gradually toward the bridge.

Test of Time

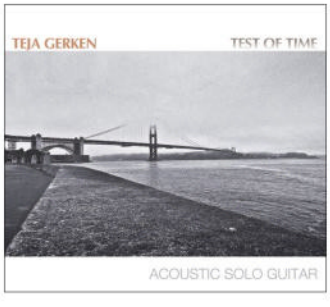
Teja Gerken shares lessons learned from his new solo effort.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

TEJA GERKEN IS a veritable treasure trove of acoustic intel. In addition to being an accomplished player and artist, he's a top educator and music journalist. Gerken has written for *Guitar Player*, *Acoustic Guitar* and *Premier Guitar* and is a co-founder of *Peghead Nation*, an incredible online educational resource for acoustic enthusiasts. Gerken often forms a duo with fellow fingerstylist Doug Young, but he's primarily a solo artist and his latest effort, *Test of Time*, is a solo affair. Gerken learned a lot about timing during the creative process, and he was kind enough to share.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

"Timing is probably the weak spot for most fingerstyle players, including myself. With it, you have many more rhythmic intricacies compared to, for example, strumming the strings with a pick. Regardless of plucking style, timing can become very fluid if you're playing solo acoustic. It doesn't matter if you add a beat here or there, or play super *rubato* [*with the rhythmic freedom to slow down and speed up as suits your performance*]."



TEST YOUR TIME

"I learned a lot working out my own version of John Coltrane's 'Naima,' which I did in DADGAD on a 2000 Taylor 355 12-string. The third passage is basically an unaccompanied solo that gets far away from the chords and the melody. When I play it live, I have a sort of roadmap, but I play it a little differently each time. And it turns out that I wasn't always hitting the exact structure of the chord progression, so before I recorded it I sat down and worked with a metronome to make sure I was following the chord structure and not adding or dropping a beat or a bar, which is so easy to do when you're unaccompanied.

"I wound up working heavily with a metronome for this entire album, and not simply in a traditional sense by practicing the tunes on guitar. But that was my ultimate test before recording a track, and if I could not pass it to my satisfaction by playing through fluently in time, then it simply needed more work. I came to realize that can be done whether or not you have a guitar handy."

"THERE'S A SIDE BENEFIT: PRACTICING WITHOUT THE GUITAR SAVES YOUR JOINTS"

TRY PRACTICING WITH NO HANDS

"I started working with no guitar. I'm not a true singer, but I can sing enough to make a melody happen along with a metronome, so I would do that to better understand where it needs to go and what needs to happen when. I find it much easier to improve by working with just the metronome and voice. If your timing is off, it's going to be just as off as when you have the guitar. The cool thing is that you can practice anywhere. I started doing it in the car along to the pace of the windshield wipers, and lying in bed at night when I couldn't sleep. I'd get an imaginary metronome going in my head and concentrate on a melody along with it."

TIME SHARE BENEFITS

"Along with my timing becoming vastly improved, I wound up with a far greater understanding of the tunes. And there's a side benefit from a health perspective. Practicing without the guitar in hand saves your joints: You don't create weird repetitive stress injuries by playing things over and over, often performing something the wrong way repeatedly. It's such an incredible help to have the tunes come quicker once you've got the guitar ready, and you wind up spending more quality time on your instrument."

Jimmy Leslie has been Frets editor since 2016. See many Guitar Player*– and Frets-related videos on his YouTube channel @TrickeyFrets and learn about his acoustic/electric rock group at spirithustler.com.*

MISCHKA GERKEN

They said it couldn't be done.
6 years in the making, the Z-80 represents the pinnacle of Dr. Z's line.
The challenge was laid out ... create an amp with the magical tone of the famed "unicorn" Vox AC80, with modern reliability and build quality. Most thought it was a futile endeavor, but Dr. Z got to work ... then kept working.
We could not be more proud of this amp.
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Guitar Player Editors' Pick

KNAGGS

SSC-J Steve Stevens Signature

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

TO DATE, KNAGGS has released several Steve Stevens models, including the SS1 SS2, SSC, SS Severn XF and SS Potomac acoustic. Now comes the SSC-J, a stripped-down LP Junior–inspired affair that has the distinction of being Stevens' first signature model without a maple top. It features a 24 ¾–inch scale mahogany set neck and a non-contoured body of choice mahogany with sumptuous graining that on my test model was highlighted by a BlackBurst nitrocellulose lacquer finish (see the specs chart for all the available colors). Weighing in at under seven pounds, the guitar feels light and nimble. It's an inspiring player, with its low action and well-groomed medium-jumbo frets on an East Indian rosewood 'board adorned with pearloid SSC block inlays that are like rectangular versions of Gretsch "thumbprint" markers.

Asked about the inspiration for this guitar, Stevens says, "As the regular SSC model is quite elaborate, we were looking for something more stripped down and at a lower price point. At the same time, I've always loved Les Paul Specials and Juniors. —I would borrow Billy Idol's '59 Junior for some of our recordings — so the SSC-J neck was inspired by a '59 reissue that I have. I'm a firm believer that part of the tone of the guitar is due to the front-to-back thickness of the neck. I think I naturally have two mindsets when playing a G-style or S-style guitar, but once there's a Floyd Rose on a guitar, my brain almost switches gears."

So does the slab mahogany body on the SSC-J greatly affect the tone compared to the SSC with its maple top? Stevens explained, "I was surprised at how different the tone is for a guitar without a maple cap on it. Besides having a more pronounced midrange, there's an overall smoothness and a vibration you can really feel through the body of the guitar, as nothing is glued to the top. It has quickly become my favorite recording guitar."

The glossy mahogany neck is set into the body and carries a rosewood 'board fitted with 22 gleaming, medium-jumbo frets with broad even crowns and smoothly finished tips. A polished bone nut blends seamlessly into the end of the fingerboard, and the headstock is faced in ebony and has Stevens' trademark "ray-gun" inlay along with his signature on the truss-rod cover. Tuning chores are handled by nickel-plated Klusons with vintage-style tulip buttons, and the strings traverse across a TonePros Tune-o-matic bridge and anchor into a stop tailpiece. The factory setup yielded sweet intonation in all positions, and I only needed to do a small truss-rod tweak to mitigate some buzzing caused by climate changes during the guitar's trip from Maryland to California.

BASED ON WHAT WAS ORIGINALLY A STUDENT MODEL, THE SSC-J IS A WORLD-CLASS AXE THAT LIVES UP TO ITS SIGNATURE STATUS

Tested through a Fender Deluxe Reverb, a '72 Marshall JMP 50-watt head (into a pair of Celestion V30s) and a Matchless Chieftain 2x12 combo, the SSC-J delivered superb clean and distorted tones that were totally controllable from the guitar via its classic setup of dual volume and tone controls and a three-way switch. The Bare Knuckles SSC pickups might be likened to a slightly hotter PAF, while they retain all of that liveliness, clarity and harmonic richness.

"I helped develop the perfect pickup with Tim Mills at Bare Knuckles a while ago," Stevens says. "I didn't want much wax potting, so obviously we were going

"I've always loved Les Paul Specials and Juniors," Stevens says. "I would borrow Billy Idol's '59 Junior for some of our recordings."

the vintage route, but at the same time I wanted something that could push your amp a little harder. So it's loosely based on their Mule model, which was the first pickup of theirs I ever purchased."

Fitted with nickel covers, these pickups give the SSC-J a great rock sound, with gobs of stringy presence and midrange heft. The volume circuit keeps the highs intact when you turn down, while the tone knobs allow for rolling off treble without masking note detail, which is great if you're after a buttery, yet well-defined lead tone, or a burnished neck-pickup sound for a jazzier flavor.

The neck pickup is great for blues and roots in clean and overdriven modes, while the bridge 'bucker is killer for lead and dirty rhythm, delivering a walloping response that sounded great through the Marshall and a UAFX Lion '68 Super Lead Amp pedal. I dug the richness and complexity of the dual-pickup setting with the Matchless set to deliver its classic shimmering grind when the guitar was fully cranked (which is where the enhanced output of the BK SSC pickups comes in handy), or with distortion added from a selection of new OD boxes from Keeley [*see* GP *June 2024*]. Through the Deluxe Reverb, the SSC-J was a natural for clean rhythm playing, as you can balance the bridge and neck volumes to get just the right balance of crispness and warmth to suit whatever style you point it at.

JANE STUART PHOTOS

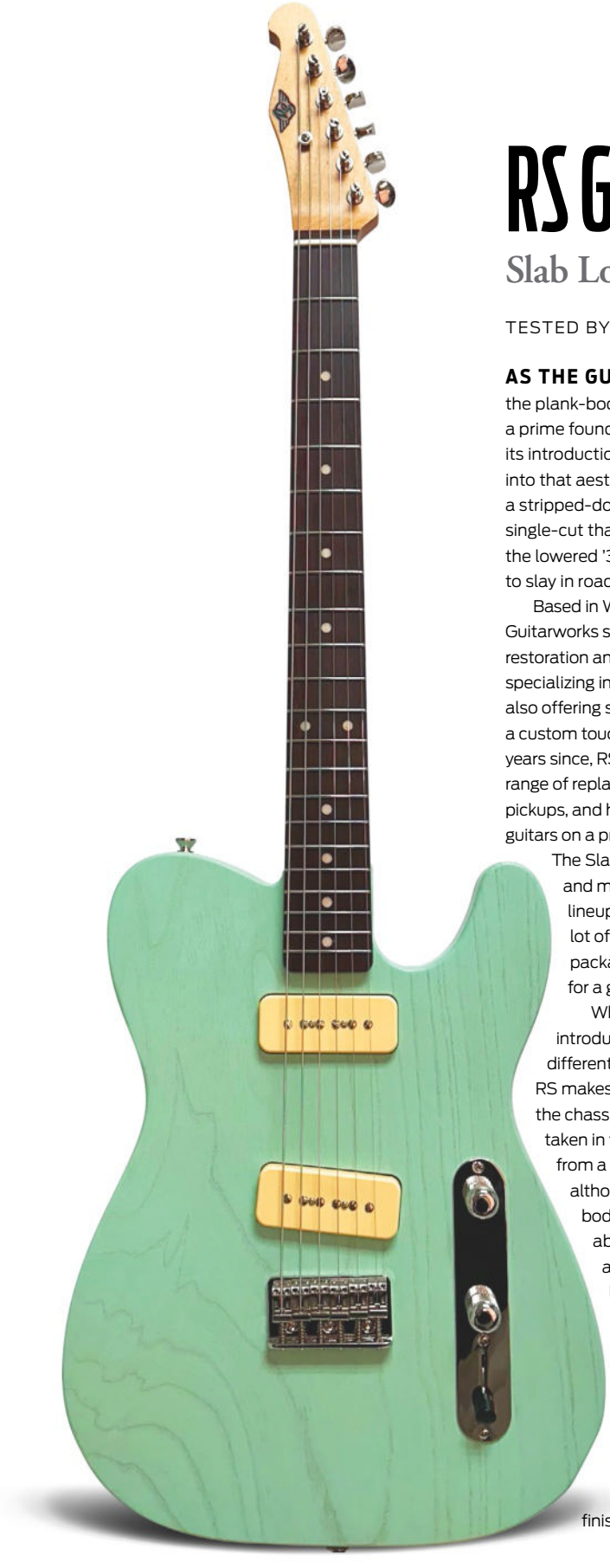
The SSC-J may be based on what was originally a student model in the Gibson lineup of the mid '50s, but Knaggs' rendition is a world-class axe that lives up to its status as a signature model. Great sounding, inspiring to play, and beautifully crafted using premium woods and hardware, it's pricey, for sure, but you get your money's worth in a guitar that's the *ne plus ultra* of LP Junior–style axes.

SPECIFICATIONS

SSC-J
CONTACT knaggsguitars.com
PRICE $4,550 street

NUT Bone, 1.685" wide
NECK Mahogany, glued in. Ray-gun headstock inlay, Steve Stevens signature on truss-rod cover, Ebony headstock veneer
FRETBOARD East Indian rosewood with SSC block inlays, 24.75" scale, 12" radius
FRETS 22 medium jumbo, (.104"/.047")
TUNERS Vintage-style Kluson with tulip buttons, nickel plated
BODY Mahogany with BlackBurst finish
BRIDGE TonePros Tune-o-matic and stop tailpiece, nickel plated
PICKUPS Bare Knuckles SSC
CONTROLS Dual volume and tone controls, three-way switch
EXTRAS Nitrocellulose lacquer finish. Also available in Black, Vintage Cherry, Shell Pink and TV Yellow. Dunlop StrapLok strap buttons. Hardshell case
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario .010–.046
WEIGHT 6.8 lbs (as tested)
BUILT USA

KUDOS Light and toneful with excellent playability
CONCERNS None



RS GUITARWORKS

Slab Lowboy

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

AS THE GUITAR world's original rebel, the plank-bodied Telecaster has provided a prime foundation for hot-rodding ever since its introduction in 1950. RS Guitarworks taps into that aesthetic with its new Slab Lowboy, a stripped-down workhorse of a bolt-neck single-cut that's appropriately named after the lowered '32 Ford street rods and outfitted to slay in roadhouse and garage-rock settings.

Based in Winchester, Kentucky, RS Guitarworks started out in 1996 as a repair, restoration and refinishing operation, specializing in saving vintage guitars, but also offering services to players who wanted a custom touch on newer instruments. In the years since, RS has developed a respected range of replacement parts, guitar kits and pickups, and has been building complete guitars on a production basis since 2005.

The Slab Lowboy is both the latest and most affordable addition to the lineup, and it promises not only a lot of performance in a gig-ready package but also impressive value for a guitar made entirely in the U.S.

While its foundation needs no introduction, the Slab Lowboy is quite different from the garden-variety Tele. RS makes its own bodies and necks, and the chassis displays the care that has been taken in this process. The body is made from a two-piece swamp ash blank, although it's darn near a one-piece body, with a single plank consuming about nine-tenths the width and another slice edge-glued to the lower bout near the bottom edge of the control plate. Considering the dimensions of the main piece it's a nice chunk of timber, bringing the guitar in at a reasonable seven and a half pounds at a time when light swamp ash is hard to find.

The thin, satin nitrocellulose finish retains an open-pore look and feel that a lot of players are likely to appreciate on a tonewood like this, with its broad, prominent grain well suited to display. My review sample was done in Surf Green, although a whopping 11 colors are offered, including the somewhat similar Foam Green, Daphne Blue, Fiesta Red, Shell Pink, Vintage White, Black, Burgundy Mist Pastel, Graffiti Yellow, Capri Orange and Dakota Red.

The neck is a traditional bolt-on, Tele-style affair, but it's very well executed and presents a couple of twists, as well. The back is made from a nice piece of rock maple that reveals some subtle flame from certain angles, and

SPECIFICATIONS

Slab Lowboy
CONTACT rsguitarworks.net
PRICE $1,495 direct

NUT Bone, 1.650" wide
NECK Hard rock maple
FRETBOARD Indian rosewood, 25.5" scale, 10" radius
FRETS 21 medium (Jescar 50085)
TUNERS Kluson Deluxe
BODY Solid swamp ash
BRIDGE Hardtail bridge with Highwood steel saddles
PICKUPS Two RS Black Magic P90s
CONTROLS Master volume and tone and three-way switch on reversed Tele plate
FACTORY STRINGS Ernie Ball Pure Nickel-Wound .010–.046
WEIGHT 7.5 lbs
BUILT USA

KUDOS A clever, well-built take on the hot-rodded Tele, with a bundle of toothsome tones and its own muscular personality
CONCERNS The high- and low-E strings are slightly misaligned outside the outer bridge-pickup poles, although to no major detriment of the guitar's tone

The misalignment between the E strings and the bridge pickup's pole pieces has negligible effect on tone.

it's also finished in thin nitrocellulose for a smooth, played-in feel that is remarkably close to that of a couple of vintage Fenders that I have propped up within arm's reach. It's topped with a slab of Indian rosewood fingerboard with 21 flawlessly dressed medium Jescar frets, a bone nut that's a hair wider than the F-standard at 1.650 inches and vintage-style nickel Kluson Deluxe tuners. Carved to what RS calls the 63 C profile, the neck is smoothly rounded and extremely comfortable in the hand, and it plays great from the nut to the neck joint.

But perhaps its most immediately noticeable feature is a reverse six-in-line headstock for a touch of the Hendrix-flipped-Strat vibe, cut to RS's own profile and adorned with a burned-in "winged RS" logo brand. Hardware at the body end includes a hardtail bridge feeding through-body stringing over a set of six Highwood steel saddles, designed with recessed adjustment screws to eliminate the flesh gouging of trad saddles while also maximizing clarity and sustain. A pair of knurled Tele-style controls complete the look.

RS has been winding its own pickups for several years and has a range of in-house renditions of the classics to choose from. The Slab Lowboy carries two Black Magic P90s, their version of the classic Gibson single-coil, wound with 42 AWG enamel-coated wire and made with Alnico V magnets. The set reads 7.2k-ohms in the neck position and 8k-ohms in the bridge for what should be a nicely balanced response between them. The bridge pickup is angled ever so slightly bass-side forward, reflecting the angled bridge pickup on original Teles. In addition to the use of a Gibson-width pickup beneath a Fender-width string spacing, this leads to a slight misalignment of the outer strings in particular, which run slightly wide of the P90's pole pieces, but we'll see whether that's a concern once the guitar's plugged in.

They are wired through what many will recognize as the reverse Tele control complement, with the volume knob placed forward on the plate for easy volume swells, followed by a tone control and three-way switch. Beyond this, these components hide a few surprises. For example, the volume potentiometer employed here is the SuperPot, made by CTS especially for RS, and features a custom taper and a heavy carbon resistance track. The switch and output jack are made by Switchcraft, and the latter is mounted in a sturdy Electrosocket jackplate.

THE SLAB LOWBOY PRESENTS AN ENJOYABLE BLEND OF THE CLASSIC AND THE HOT ROD IT'S INTENDED TO BE

Played unplugged, the Slab Lowboy has a lively, resonant voice with good sustain. Amped up through a 65amps London head and 2x12 cab, a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo and a Fractal FM9 modeler into headphones, it presented an enjoyable blend of the classic and the hot rod it's intended to be, delivering a fun ride in the process.

Although it's kind of an off-the-menu combination per the classic archetypes, the inclusion of a P90 in the neck position of a 25 ½–inch scale, maple bolt-neck, swamp ash–bodied guitar introduces colors we don't normally hear from this pickup in its more familiar mahogany setting. Arguably, the combination makes it a little more versatile, adding some snap and spank and low-end solidity to the brew while retaining enough midrange grunt to declare its presence. It makes for a throaty, expressive tone overall, with great playing dynamics when you regulate your pick attack.

The bridge pickup is designed for more warmth and richness relative to its usual response, while retaining the P90 grind that fans of the breed will recognize, but a little less spikiness than you might expect from the treble position. It's admirably clear, too, with the grunt and oomph of an 8k-ohm P90 but little of the mud that some lesser types slather over your tone. Unsurprisingly, both positions love a dollop of gain, and there's rock and roll aplenty here with a JHS Angry Charlie or Silktone Overdrive+ [*see review, page 90*] applied to the input of either amp. When selected together, the pickups combine for a slightly scooped and chimey rendition of the Tele middle position, beloved to many players, but with a little more grit and muscle.

As for the misalignment between the E strings relative to the bridge pickup's outer poles: There is perhaps a slight softening in their response, although you're likely to notice it only when scrutinizing their sound and output, particularly through loud, clear amp settings. Once I started playing, I mostly forgot about it, and it didn't dull my enjoyment of a guitar that offers a big bundle of personality in a simple, stripped-down package.

The Touchstone Signature Dreadnought (left) and OM.

BOURGEOIS

Touchstone Signature OM and Dreadnought

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

THE BOURGEOIS TOUCHSTONE Series is interesting on several levels, and the new Signature models are now at the top of that line. Dana Bourgeois is a highly respected luthier, and his handcrafted instruments are highly coveted, but they come at high cost. The Touchstone Series is intriguing because of its hybrid design and a build concept that involves Eastman Guitars overseas, making the crossover product much more affordable than a full USA hand build. The intention is to deliver the essence of a full Bourgeois experience at almost half the price. We were very curious to get our hands on these OM and Dreadnought Touchstones.

Primary Bourgeois hallmarks include a hand-tuned top and a six-bolt neck attachment, and all Touchstone Series models — including the Vintage, Country Boy and new Signature lines — retain these features. In fact, there are more similarities than differences. All three lines include two body styles — OM and Dreadnought — and have Alaskan spruce tops. The new Signature Series, however, features old-growth Sitka that's been torrefied — heated in an oxygen-free environment — to remove compounds that dampen vibrations and deliver optimal tone right out of the box.

Bourgeois and his team in Lewiston, Maine, tap-tune the top and meticulously voice it, carving Adirondack spruce bracings by hand before vacuum sealing and shipping the Touchstone tops to Eastman's workshop in China. Luthiers trained in the Bourgeois style integrate the tops into back, sides and necks of his design. That's a notable trend. Builders are experimenting with new ways to keep costs down

The Signature models' gold Schaller open-gear tuners have ebony buttons.

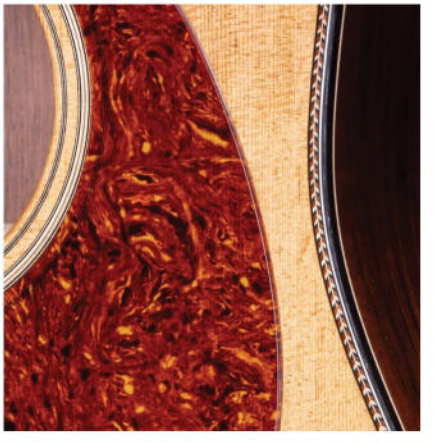
while having more confidence in well-trained craftspersons beyond American borders, resulting in more foreign involvement in fancier stuff.

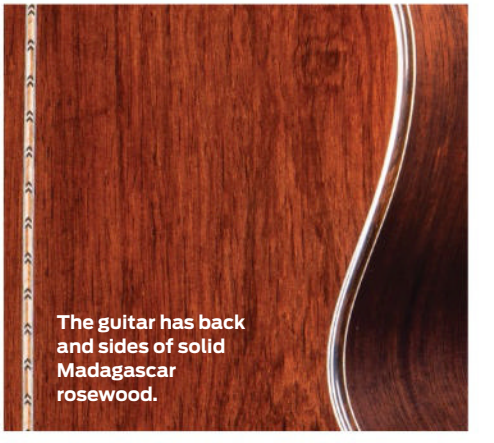
The Touchstone Signature Series guitars that I received are medium fancy and built beautifully. The tri-color herringbone purfling is distinctively cool and classy, as is the gorgeous back stripe, which looks almost three dimensional. The pearl script logo and fret markers add elegance, and the gold Schaller open-gear tuners with ebony buttons look as fine as they work. The woods are choice, and the finish is nice and glossy. In fact, I couldn't find a blemish or sharp edge anywhere. You can't help but notice the natural Adirondack spruce bracing. It stands out, since torrefied spruce is darker than natural, and the inside of the back is dark rosewood from Madagascar.

Playability is wonderful on both guitars. The neck profile is modern slim, and the factory action was nice and easy, but it's not trying to play like an electric guitar. A slight V is a historic nod that's great for a bit of a thumb anchor without being severe, like some classic acoustic designs. The width at the nut measures a unique 1.72 inches, making it slightly narrower than the modern standard of 1.75 inches and not quite as narrow as the 1.69 inches more common in the past, particularly on dreadnoughts. Touchstone specs remain the same whether one orders the Dreadnought or OM. As you would expect, the OM caters more to fingerstyle playing, while the Dreadnought excels when played with a pick, either with big strums or a bluegrass-style flatpicking attack.

Touchstone Signatures have their own sonics that I'll relate to more familiar benchmarks, given that Bourgeois traditionally makes about 500 guitars a year. Considering an OM and a dreadnought made of rosewood and spruce, it's impossible not to think of a Martin in Style 28 as the historic standard. The shape, aesthetic and overall MO of these modern takes on traditional builds is close to Martin's Modern Deluxe concept, but the lower cost is more like a Standard. They both have even balance from low to high and impressive projection. They are not boomy like some rosewood builds. The bolt-on neck, lively response and hi-def articulation is more relatable to Taylor. But Touchstones are pure acoustic, not acoustic-electric. Ultimately, this crossover series, from Bourgeois via Eastman, is unique.

Bourgeois should find a broader audience with these Touchstone Signatures, including fans who can't muster the money for a full USA build and fans of macro brands who would appreciate a more personal touch. And while aficionados may dislike the brand becoming less boutique, the OM and the D Signature/TS represent something never quite seen or heard before, yet quite familiar and traditional as well. A Bourgeois guitar is always worth checking out, and that's certainly the case with the new Touchstone Signature Series.




The guitar has back and sides of solid Madagascar rosewood.

SPECIFICATIONS

D Signature/TS and OM Signature /TS
CONTACT bourgeoisguitars.com
PRICE $3,599 street

NUT WIDTH 1.72", bone
NECK 14 fret mahogany
FRETBOARD Ebony, 25.4" scale, pearl inlays
FRETS 20
TUNERS Schaller Grand Tune, gold open-gear with ebony buttons
BODY Solid Madagascar rosewood back and sides, solid torrefied old-growth Alaskan Sitka spruce top
BRIDGE Ebony with bone saddle
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario XT Light Gauge
WEIGHT 4.6 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Designed and hand-voiced in USA, handcrafted in USA and Beijing

KUDOS Custom craftsmanship at a high value, wonderful playability, nice articulate tones
CONCERNS Only that the boutique brand becomes less boutique

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

TWO NOTES

GENOME Amp Modeling Software

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

FRENCH GEARMAKER TWO notes (to use the company's preferred upper-/lower-case style) is best known for creating hardware that processes digital simulations of speaker cabinets and, more recently, full guitar amplifiers [*see our review of the Opus in April 2024*]. But the company is also a long-time developer of software editors that maximize these units' functions and their users' abilities to create their own presets. So it makes sense that it has now put these capabilities together in GENOME, a totally in-the-box modeling plug-in for use with the most popular DAWs in Mac and Windows.

As Two notes describes it, GENOME is an "ecosystem" designed "to deliver the pinnacle in end-to-end tone shaping." Being entirely plug-in based, it's clearly designed for home and studio use, placing it on par with Line 6's Helix Native, IK Multimedia's AmpliTube, Native Instruments' Guitar Rig, Positive Grid's Bias FX 2, Waves' Voltage, and several options from Neural DSP, Universal Audio and others.

Part of what makes GENOME more than a software-based amp modeler is that it can generate the amp portion of your tone in two ways. The first is via Tube Stage Modeling (TSM), Two notes' own relatively traditional approach to digital tube-amp emulation. TSM amp models in GENOME include Foundry (a.k.a. Fender), Albion (Marshall), Foxy (Vox), Nifty Fifty (Boogie-esque high-gain) and Peggy (an Ampeg sim for bass). Within each of these, the dedicated preamp circuits can be mixed with any output-stage available to the others, including both push-pull and single-ended 6L6, EL34, EL84 and KT88.

The second way to dial up an amp sound — or an effect, for that matter — involves the Codex Unification Engine, a piece of software within GENOME that can host "captures" created by Two notes or the third-party suppliers Neural Amp Modeler (NAM), Proteus and Aida-X. Rather than a software model that digitally re-creates all stages of a classic amplifier, a capture is essentially a sonic imprint of the characteristics of an

SPECIFICATIONS

GENOME Amp Modeling Software
CONTACT two-notes.com
PRICE $79 for direct download (free to Two notes hardware owners)

FEATURES Plug-in software featuring TSM amp modeling, DynIR cabinet sims, CODEX Unification Engine (capture processor/player), and pedal and studio effects sims
BUILT Developed in France
FORMATS All main plug-in formats, including VST3, AAX and AU

KUDOS Comprehensive, creative and great-sounding modeling software at an extremely reasonable price
CONCERNS Although it works with a wide range of systems, check compatibility and requirements with the manufacturer before downloading

GENOME's interface provides a simple lane-based signal flow that makes it extremely easy to edit complete rigs and create presets.

actual amplifier, which can then be adapted by its host to reproduce that sound. (Kemper, a pioneer in this tech, refers to these as "profiles.") The benefit is that you can, with the right capturing/profiling system, re-create the sound of any amplifier you have access to, or acquire a near-endless library from third-party suppliers. And since Codex is more than just a neutral host for amp captures, it lets you mix-and-match tone stacks and position them before or after the captures' gain stages. It also provides a graphic EQ and Enhancer for considerable tone tweaking.

GENOME includes an extensive suite of classic pedals that can be placed before or after the amp block. In addition, the DynIR Cab engine offers more than 700 cab models, with eight options for two mics per cab (with near-infinite positioning), as well as studio-style post-amp processing for dynamics, reverb, delay, stereo width, enhancement and other effects.

GENOME's computer interface will largely be familiar to those who have used this type of software before. Even so, Two notes has applied some thoughtful twists to the user experience and neatly tidied up the workflow in the process with a simple lane-based signal flow that makes it extremely easy to edit complete rigs and create presets. Simply click on the relevant block in the lane at the top of the plug-in window to activate a pedal, amp, DynIR cab, or other processor; a visual rendering will fill the center of the screen, allowing analog-style controls for that block that you can adjust and save. The process makes it extremely easy to set up relatively complicated signal chains, either series or parallel paths, and save them as user presets.

A SKY'S-THE-LIMIT MODELING ENVIRONMENT, WITH SOUND QUALITY THAT SITS WELL AMONG OTHER LEADING SYSTEMS

As for presets, GENOME includes eight banks of 100 rigs per bank, with easy import and export functions for saving and recalling even more. Diving deeper into creative functions within the plug-in reveals nifty tools, such as selective parameter automation within your DAW when used as a plug-in to process recorded tracks. For example, you can create an automated increase in the drive setting of a Tube Screamer pedal model for a particular guitar passage, or turn up the feedback on an analog delay pedal model in the song's bridge.

I tested GENOME as a plug-in within Pro Tools on my Apple iMac, running a Gibson ES-355 and a Fender Telecaster through a Universal Audio Apollo Twin Duo's Hi-Z input. After a few minor adjustments for optimal latency and oversampling settings, I found it ran smoothly, and was quick and easy to get up and running with. Sound quality and playing feel were excellent.

GENOME includes a plethora of factory presets to get you started. Some are generic, like Cali Cleans and Brit Pack, while others are along the lines of thinly veiled artist-based tones, like Ode to Angus, Note in a Bottle and Sandman. As with most capable modelers today, you get out of it what you put into it, and I believe most players will find themselves more at home and creatively rewarded once they have moved beyond these foundations to compose their own presets.

And once you're there, this thing flies! GENOME is close to a sky's-the-limit modeling environment, with sound quality that sits well among other leading systems on the market. The more you dive into its potential, the more it delivers.

In addition to GENOME's in-the-box capabilities, you can create hybrid rigs by connecting preamps and/or analog pedals to the front end and disabling the preamp block, or introducing traditional tube amps via Torpedo Captor X, Suhr Reactive Load, Mesa CabClone or another load box and disabling the amp block. However you cut it, GENOME is an Editors' Pick Award winner given its price, ease of use and massive suite of high quality features. It's certain to turn up on countless guitarists' workstations.

Available in Concrete (here) and Dark (below right) finish options, Overdrive+ looks like it came from the 1970s.

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

SILKTONE

Overdrive+

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

CALIFORNIA-BASED MAKER Silktone is best known for its range of small-to-smaller tube amps, but the company does have the well-respected Fuzz pedal in its catalog. And thanks to the arrival of the equally eponymously named Overdrive+, that's no longer the lone stompbox on offer. A quick look at any of Silktone's three amp models or the Fuzz itself quickly tells you that company founder and head designer Charles Henry isn't satisfied merely remaking circuits that have gone before, and the Overdrive+ is no different. Although the textured metal box (offered in Concrete or Dark finish options), chrome-skirted knobs, retro graphics and generic name hark back to some seminal overdrives of the '70s and early '80s, the circuit and features are different from any previous OD I know of, and the results put this pedal in a place all its own.

If an overdrive designed by a self-proclaimed hater of drive pedals sounds like something you wouldn't even want to plug into, think again: It just indicates the level of "prove myself wrong"-ism that Henry embraced in this challenge. After acknowledging that overdrives are already everywhere, Henry quips, "I've always maintained that the best drive pedal is the one that drives you to the store to get P90s and a real amp." So the fact that he has even released the Overdrive+ to the public indicates he's happy to put this one on the floor and let it do the (dirty) talking for him.

Knobs-wise, the Overdrive+ carries what we might call the Holy Trinity: gain, tone and volume. That sparsity belies the versatility delivered by the trio of mini-toggles and the second foot switch (in addition to the standard on/off switch) that populate the box's top face. In the gaps beneath the knobs are a clipping mode switch to select between Asymmetrical (left) and Symmetrical (right), and a Bass Cut that tightens up the low end. Down in the bottom-left corner, in a little island all on their own, are the boost foot switch with its filter-mode switch and status light. Intended to add further gain to the signal while enhancing second-order harmonic distortion, this boost can be voiced with an inductor added for a cocked wah–like

The Strangle and Raw filter modes add sonic versatility, as does the clipping mode switch (shown far right).

sound in Strangle mode, or engaged with the inductor bypassed for the chunkier Raw mode.

The circuit inside uses a combination of op-amps, JFETs and diodes. Given that Henry openly states he "fucking hates the sound of op-amp clipping," these components are used for high-headroom amplification and buffering only, with all clipping undertaken by the JFETs and diodes. The input from the center-negative power connection is boosted internally to 30 volts, so nothing greater than a nine-volt DC supply should be used.

I tested the Overdrive+ with a Fender Jaguar and a Gibson ES-355 into a tweed Deluxe-style 1x12 combo and a 65amps London head and 2x12 cab. I immediately found that it not only sounds great but is also deceptively versatile, given its relatively simple feature set.

"THE BEST DRIVE PEDAL IS THE ONE THAT DRIVES YOU TO THE STORE TO GET P90S AND A REAL AMP"

At its heart, Overdrive+ is an extremely rich, full-bodied and dynamic overdrive, with a broad range of gain available. Personally, I liked it best with the gain knob at around one o'clock or beyond, which induced juicier harmonic overtones and a delectable touch sensitivity into the tone. Thick, yet biting, smooth, yet articulate, these settings delivered chunky rhythm and dynamically expressive lead tones that I really enjoyed digging into, rendering the Overdrive+ one of the tastiest new OD pedals that I've played in a while.

For all this, though, lower settings were still useful for gentler thick boosting, for pushing a tube amp on the edge of breakup just over the edge or for adding texture as an always-on pedal. It was difficult to pick a favorite clipping mode. I found Symmetrical creamier and more luscious for home or bedroom playing, but Asymmetrical delivered a bark and edge that cut through better in a busier setting. (You should take note that Symmetrical delivers a slight volume drop, which is natural due to its slight compression.) The Bass Cut also proved a handy switch, ably suiting the pedal to different guitars, amps and playing styles.

Yet, all of this is still without accounting for what Henry calls the "plus" side of the Overdrive+. That boost foot switch is superbly useful, delivering a well-judged gain-and-volume jump that should keep your sound-person from diving for the faders. Set to Raw, a stomp here adds enough extra girth and grind to make it an instant rhythm/lead option all in one pedal. The instant cocked-wah sound provided by Strangle proved even more appealing than I'd imagined, tapping a flutey, singing lead mode that lent a little more color to the classic woman-tone setting.

My only real critique is that the taper of the volume (output) control comes on extremely quickly, and I never found myself able to use it much beyond nine o'clock without thumping the amp's front end more than I'd normally like. Henry tells me that's intentional, as he likes a lot of gain in his pedals and has little need for much range below unity gain. It might take some players by surprise, but it's no big deal once you're aware of it and have found your own sweet spot. All in all, the Silktone Overdrive+ is a characterful, original and extremely versatile design in a sea of overdrives, and it earns an Editors' Pick Award for its achievements.

SPECIFICATIONS

Silktone Overdrive+
CONTACT silktone.org
PRICE $269 street

CONTROLS Gain, tone, volume. Switches for Asymmetrical/Symmetrical clipping, Low Cut, and foot-switchable boost with Raw/Strangle voicing.
EXTRAS Input and output, true-bypass switching, LED indicator for each foot switch, center-negative 9VDC input
SIZE 4.5" x 3.25" x 1.5" (LxWxD)
BUILT USA

KUDOS A clever and original circuit design yields a characterful and extremely versatile overdrive
CONCERNS The volume control's taper comes on quickly, but it's not an issue once you're used to it

The Nichols 1966 is a reissue of Steve Ridinger's own original-design dirt pedal.

DANELECTRO

Nichols 1966

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

THIS NEW DANELECTRO pedal has the distinction of being a reissue of a stompbox that company owner and Foxx founder Steve Ridinger designed and started making at his home in Nichols Canyon Place in Hollywood, when he was just 14. Ridinger says he built the first five or six pedals — which featured a circuit that wasn't a clone of anything and produced a sound midway between distortion and fuzz — and then found a guy nearby to build the rest of the pedals. Ridinger went on to sell some 3,000 of them — while he was still in high school!

The Nichols 1966 squeezes a lot into a compact format, wielding controls for fuzz, drive, tone and volume, all topped with Deco-style "arrow" knobs that look like they're from an old Bakelite table radio. There's also a mini-toggle with Stock and Mid Cut settings. The former provides the full range sound of the original circuit, while the latter delivers a slightly slimmer response that's more scooped in the mids.

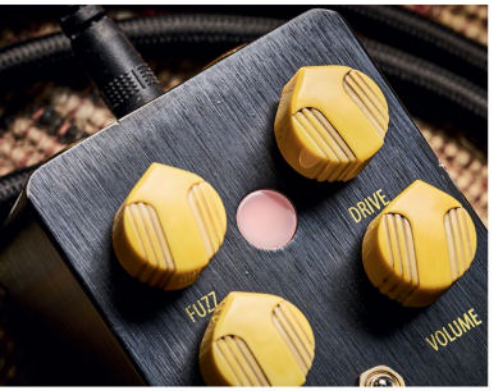
Within its black, die-cast aluminum housing, the Nichols' circuity is laid out on interconnected PCBs and features discrete NOS silicon transistors, which, unfortunately, you can't fully appreciate because only the back sides of the boards are viewable. The true-bypass foot switch is a mechanical type, and there are front-mounted jacks for input, output and nine-volt DC power. Battery juice isn't an option, nor is an AC/DC adapter included.

I tested the Nichols 1966 with a Fender 70th Anniversary HHS Strat Ultra, a Knaggs SSC-J [*see review, page 82*] and a PRS Dustie Waring Signature, using a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a '72 Marshall 50-watt head running into a OX Top Box and out to a 2x12 cab loaded with Alessandro SC64 12-inch speakers. The Nichols 1966 proved a fun pedal that dishes out tones that marry fuzz and rounder overdrive textures, depending on how you position the knobs. The controls are quite interactive, and for that reason they offer lots of latitude for concocting sounds suitable for different guitars and amps.

IT KEEPS YOUR SOUND INTACT WHILE RUNNING AT LEVELS YOU CAN CONTROL RIGHT FROM THE GUITAR

And then there's the aforementioned voicing switch, which helps fatten things up and get a raw and explosive distortion tone in the Stock setting, or deliver a more modern response with hollower mids when Mid Cut is engaged, which is great with humbuckers. The bottom end remains pretty consistent on either setting, but the character and feel changes enough that I found myself wanting to be able to foot-switch between Stock and Mid Cut for an even more expressive playing experience.

The dirt circuits are mostly independent too, so you can use one or the other if you wish to hear mainly fuzz or distortion. Either way, the sound is fullest when the knobs are



at least a quarter way up or so. Since a blend of the two distortion types best suited my ears, I found it good to start out with fuzz and drive about halfway up and take it from there, varying the ratios as needed to ultimately get distortion tones that were infused with this cool halo of fuzz — a sonic brew that's easily zeroed-in for different guitars by adjusting balance and output levels, and using the tone control to shave off highs for a buttery tone that's defined and well presented. The compression is mild even at higher gain settings, and since this pedal doesn't impart the midrange coloration you get from some classic ODs, the Nichols keeps the sounds of your guitars intact while running at distortion levels that you can control for lead and rhythm right from the guitar if you're using it as an always-on affair.

Bottom line, the Nichols 1966 is a satisfying pedal that's loaded with cool distortion textures, is a blast to play and kind of inspiring in how it's rooted in a place and time when the availability of grind pedals was limited, to say the least. Kudos to Steve Ridinger and his team for doing the detective work required to bring this long-lost treasure back to life.

SPECIFICATIONS

Nichols 1966
CONTACT danelectro.com
PRICE $199

CONTROLS Fuzz, drive, tone, volume. Stock/Mid Cut switch
I/O Input, output, 9VDC power jack
FOOT SWITCH Mechanical, true bypass
EXTRAS Nifty-looking Deco-style knobs. LED bypass indicator. NOS transistors
SIZE 4.5" x 2.5" x 1.5" (LxWxH)
WEIGHT .54 lbs
BUILT China

KUDOS All-original circuit delivers a cool range of fuzz-meets-distortion flavors. Leaves your guitar's tone intact and can be left on if you want to control distortion levels from your instrument
CONCERNS Not exactly a concern but no provision for battery power

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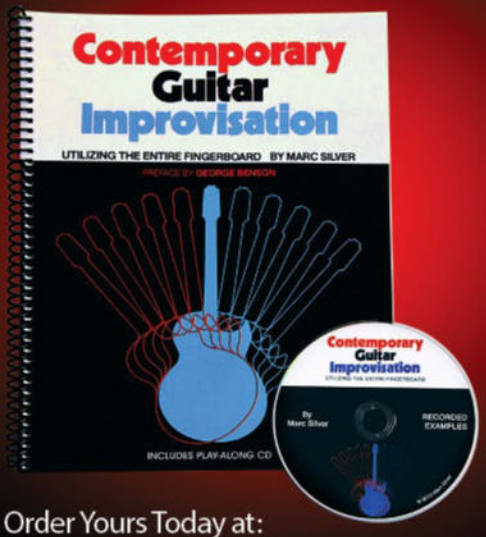

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Mott in 1973. (from left) Mick Ralphs, Ian Hunter, Dale Griffin and Pete "Overend" Watts.

How I Wrote...

"All the Way From Memphis"

Ian Hunter opens up about the fate of the guitar at the heart of **Mott the Hoople**'s 1973 classic tune.

BY JOE MATERA

FOR IAN HUNTER, the tale of a mislaid guitar has been the bones to the English glam-rockers' 1973 classic "All The Way From Memphis." But now, 50 years later, he wants to set the record straight about the forgotten "six-string razor" that sets the tale in motion.

"That was really a bit of poetic licence," Hunter admits. "[*Lead guitarist*] Mick Ralphs' guitar was actually stolen at a gig in Long Island a little earlier on our American tour in late '72, not left behind." Ralphs also had a fear of flying, and Hunter worried he might skip the Memphis gig after his guitar got lifted. "All he had to do was go back to England and it would have been all over," Hunter says. "Which I figured he would do. But in the end, he did the gig."

MEMPHIS MAGIC

Its U.S. roots aside, "All the Way From Memphis" was birthed in Hunter's home in Wembley, London, in 1973. "I had just gotten married, and we had this old upright piano, with all the white notes gone," he recalls. "So I started playing around with the black notes, and that's how the music came together. But the lyrics took weeks."

It was while musing over the dramas of that 1972 tour that Hunter suddenly happened upon the song's subject matter. "I remembered we'd done that gig in Memphis just before that Christmas, where Joe Walsh was opening for us," he explains. "A lot of weird things happened. We were told nobody was going to be at the gig, but we hit the stage to a full house. It was kind of a magic night, so the lyric was based around that."

The rollicking piano and sax interplay, as well as Ralphs' lead guitar, reinforce the lyric's "merrily we go to hell" attitude, as perfectly encapsulated in the line, "You look like a star but you're still on the dole." Hunter agrees. "People don't realize the investment that goes into it all, which the artist has got to pay off. All this stuff costs money, and the labels have to recoup it. That's why, back then, you'd see an artist with a top-five single and a Platinum album, but they were broke."

"A LOT OF WEIRD THINGS HAPPENED. WE WERE TOLD NOBODY WOULD BE AT THE GIG, BUT WE HIT THE STAGE TO A FULL HOUSE"

MAINLY A LES PAUL MAN

When it came time to record the song, the group entered Abbey Road Studios to lay it down for their next album, *Mott*. Ralphs recorded his blistering lead lines using his standard guitar-and-amp setup of a Les Paul Jr. into a Marshall amp. "Mick was mainly a Les Paul man," Hunter recalls. "We had a great engineer in Bill Price, who improved everything we did. That helped a lot to make everything sound great."

COLUMBIA RULES THE AIRWAVES

Mott already had a strong following in the U.K., where "All the Way From Memphis" climbed to No. 10 on the charts. In the U.S, the group's record label prioritized it to album-oriented FM radio stations rather than the Top 40 AM stations, and the song failed to chart. "Columbia Records really didn't know how to market us," Hunter says. "They thought we were an FM band, and so they weren't pushing any AM singles. We said, 'Well, it doesn't seem to be doing the Rolling Stones any harm, as they're getting pushed on both AM *and* FM'. But for some reason they just pushed us to FM, and it never got airplay."

Regardless, *Mott* — the album — hit an impressive number 35 on the *Billboard* 200 chart and helped "All the Way From Memphis" reach a wider audience than the band's previous efforts. The song remains a fan favorite and has been covered by the short-lived early '90s Michael Schenker/Tracii Guns outfit Contraband, and even by Brian May who, included it on his 1998 solo album, *Another World*, aided by Hunter.

"Brian was lovely to work with, a great guitar player and great person," Hunter reveals. "And he's a very serious kind of guy. We did the Astoria in London one time, and Brian was going to get up and play with us, but he's very picky about his guitar, especially his Red Special. I was with him in the dressing room trying to explain something about the song. I said, 'Here, wait a minute,' and took his guitar off him to show him what I was trying to explain. And you should have just seen the look on his face! He was petrified. He was so scared. There's just something about guitars and that song."

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